

THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY MEDAL (N.Z.B.M.)

Philip Samuel BLAKEMAN **Sergeant, Royal New Zealand Air Force**

Date of action: 3 June 2004

Date of award: 14 October 2006

Citation

On the evening of 3 June 2004 Sergeant Blakeman was the winchperson in the crew of an Iroquois helicopter that had been tasked to assist with the evacuation of a Royal Australian Navy seaman who had suffered serious spinal injuries after falling down a ravine on the Florida Islands, part of the Solomon Islands group.

The crew had been flying for over three hours, in low cloud and torrential rain, by the time they finally positioned over the rescue site in the evening to rescue the seaman. As Sergeant Blakeman was lowered on the winch wire, visibility reduced markedly when the helicopter rotors sucked down the thin layer of cloud from above, such that the winch operator in the helicopter could see neither the ground, nor Sergeant Blakeman on the wire, only the treetops. The winch operation was continued with Sergeant Blakeman passing through a gap in the 65 metre high treetops, amidst broken branches, until he reached the ground some 75 metres below the helicopter. This was almost at the full extent of the winch cable.

Sergeant Blakeman first supervised the winch recovery of the doctor, an activity which was made difficult by the lack of direct communication with the helicopter. Through relaying radio directions through HMAS Tarakan, which was anchored nearby, Sergeant Blakeman was able to effect the doctor's recovery and then directed his attention to the injured seaman, who he assisted into a stokes litter. He then accompanied the injured seaman as they were winched up to the helicopter. During the ascent they were exposed to the hazards presented by darkness, bad weather, poor communications with the helicopter crew and the distance to the helicopter. The hazards were further compounded when Sergeant Blakeman, and the stretcher-bound casualty, began to spin rapidly for much of the ascent through the trees, until reaching the helicopter.

Sergeant Blakeman was well aware of the significant risk that this rescue posed to him personally. Had the helicopter crew lost visual reference or been unable to maintain a stable hover, the winch cable might have had to be cut and he would most likely have been killed. Despite the risk, he conducted his duties calmly and professionally, and his actions were central to the safe recovery of the injured seaman.