

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

Sophie CONTI

Date of action: 13 October 2008

Date of award: 2 April 2011

Citation

On 12 October 2008 Maurice and Sophie Conti and their two children (aged 6 and 4) were anchored in sheltered waters off Vatulele Island, south west of Suva on their catamaran, the Ocealys. At approximately 11.45 p.m., they picked up a mayday call on their marine radio.

The call was from the Australian boat Timella that had a New Zealand woman and her two sailing companions on board and which had struck the Takau Lakaleka Reef south of Viti Levu, and was hard aground. The weather was reported as being atrocious; with winds of 30 knots and 3-4 metre swells. By 2.00 a.m. on 13 October 2008, the Timella started taking on water and 15 minutes later sank. The situation of the crew was made even more perilous when the mast of the Timella punctured the life raft and this too sank, leaving the crew stranded on the coral reef.

No other boat heard the mayday call, except for a cruise ship located some 130 nautical miles south of the incident, too far away to render immediate assistance. Sophie Conti managed to contact the New Zealand High Commission in Suva by phone and later established communications with the Rescue Coordination Centre in New Zealand. Between them, they would co-ordinate the events that were to follow. It quickly became apparent that the Fijian Navy vessel on standby would be unable to leave port immediately, there was no helicopter rescue service available in Suva, and a private helicopter service on a nearby island could not be contacted. No assistance would therefore be forthcoming from the Fijian Search and Rescue organisations until daylight. Even if this did eventuate, it was unlikely that it would reach the Timella until about midday on 13 October, probably too late to save those on board.

Realising that they were the only hope for those aboard the Timella, Maurice and Sophie Conti weighed anchor at 3.00 a.m. and set course for the Timella, which was some 12 nautical miles and 2.5 hours' sailing from their position. They navigated their way out of their sheltered anchorage, in complete darkness, by following a reverse track on their GPS. Negotiating the strong winds and heavy seas, they arrived at the rescue area at 5.30 a.m. By this time the crew of the Timella had been in the water for over two hours and could not be seen. Maurice and Sophie continued searching the area until they managed to spot three "dots" on the reef. After a fruitless search for a way to get close to those on the reef, Maurice launched the dingy while Sophie took control of the Ocealys.

In what has been described as a brilliant display of seamanship, Maurice Conti picked his way through the reef, despite the rough seas, and reached the crew, some of whom were showing signs of hypothermia. By 6.00 a.m. he had pulled them to safety and successfully made his way back to the Ocealys, a difficult and dangerous endeavour on its own. Four hours' sailing later, the Ocealys reached the sheltered waters of Lukiri Harbour and the Robinson Crusoe Island Resort.

Throughout this incident the Contis had been the focal point for communications between the crew of the Timella, the search and rescue operations at the New Zealand High Commission in Suva and the Rescue Coordination Centre in New Zealand. It was this communication link that not only assisted the rescue operation, but provided a source of hope to those marooned on the reef.

Had it not been for the courage, determination and superb seamanship of Maurice and Sophie Conti, the lives of crew of the Timella, who were stranded on the reef, would probably have been lost. It should be noted that, throughout the rescue, the Contis had to consider the safety of their two young children, who were also on board the Ocealys.