

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

Shaun Paul SEXTON **Squadron Leader, 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 Squadron Leader Sexton was captain of an Iroquois helicopter tasked to assist with the rescue 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.

Attempts by others to complete a rescue in daylight had been unsuccessful, but because of the critical nature of the seaman's injuries and the inability to rescue him by land, Squadron Leader Sexton decided to make a further rescue attempt at night. Despite having to negotiate darkness, low cloud and torrential rain, which forced him to turn back a number of times, he managed to reach the rescue party on the ground at a site beneath 65 metre trees on a plateau 200 metres above the coast.

After the crew had commenced winching a crewman down through a small clearing in the forest canopy, visibility reduced markedly when the aircraft rotors sucked down the thin layer of cloud from above. This meant that the crew could see neither the ground, nor the crewman on the wire; only the treetops. Despite only being able to determine the situation on the ground through radio transmissions, which were relayed by the co-pilot through HMAS Tarakan anchored nearby, Squadron Leader Sexton calmly directed the crew during the recovery. While undertaking the recovery he maintained the helicopter in a steady hover 75 metres above the rescue site, despite having very poor visual references, low cloud and rain, and while using night vision equipment. During the course of this hazardous rescue, Squadron Leader Sexton also capably handled the loss of communications with the winch operator on two occasions.

In the face of the most trying conditions, and having acknowledged the risk that was required to effect the rescue, Squadron Leader Sexton then managed that risk most professionally. His cool demeanour throughout the operation, despite the risk to himself and his crew, was pivotal to the success of his crew in recovering the injured seaman to the aircraft and subsequently to a medical facility. Throughout this rescue mission, Squadron Leader Sexton demonstrated bravery as well as flying skills and leadership of the highest order.