

THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY STAR (N.Z.B.S.)

Robert Mark (Mark) LAW

Date of action: 9 December 2019

Date of award: 26 October 2022

Citation

On Monday 9 December 2019, at 2.11pm, an explosive volcanic eruption occurred on Whakaari/White Island in the Bay of Plenty, shooting a massive column of steam into the air and blowing a wave of hot rock, ash, and acid gas across the crater floor. 47 people were present on the island at the time of the eruption, which resulted in the deaths of 22 people, either in the explosion or from injuries sustained. A further 25 people suffered moderate to significant injuries, with the majority needing intensive care for severe burns. Dispatch orders from the New Zealand's Air Ambulance Service diverted rescue and paramedic helicopters to Whakatāne, as landing on the island was deemed too dangerous post eruption.

Mr Mark Law, CEO of the heavy lift and aerial support helicopter company Kāhu NZ, became aware of the eruption and learnt that a helicopter tour from Volcanic Air had been on the island at the time. Mr Law flew out to the island from Whakatāne, passing the White Island visitors boat 'Phoenix' halfway back to Whakatāne at 3.05pm before setting down on a landing platform around 3.12pm. Mr Law contacted another Kāhu NZ helicopter crewed by Tom Storey and Jason Hill, who had taken off from Whakatāne at 2.50pm and had hovered by the Phoenix, with the offer of airlifting the worst injured. After learning that the Phoenix would soon receive support from a coast guard boat with paramedics onboard, Mr Law radioed Hill and Storey to assist him on the island.

Mr Law, while alone, put on a gas mask and waded through shin-deep ash to locate 20 people in the crater. When Mr Storey and Mr Hill landed, Mr Law left the casualties and went to brief Storey and Hill on what he had observed.

With acidic air a present issue for the helicopter engines, the pilots left their engines on and rotors turning once landed to improve their chances of taking off again. With gas masks on, Law, Storey and Hill waded back through ash to the casualties.

The casualties were in various positions, covered in thick ash. Ash fell on the men as they moved about and the acidic air made breathing difficult. The crew moved from person to person, checking on the casualties who had extensive burns and were in various stages of consciousness. Mr Hill ran back to the landing platform and flew his helicopter up to the crater for casualties to be loaded onboard by the crew. He lifted off with the maximum of five casualties aboard his helicopter at 3.48pm. Mr Law then retrieved his helicopter and flew up to the crater while Mr Storey readied the next five casualties.

Another helicopter crew arrived on the island and assisted Mr Law and Mr Storey to lift casualties onto Law's helicopter. Mr Law then took off with five casualties, flying to Whakatāne Hospital.

The crews had faced difficulty in loading the casualties, who had no strength to lift themselves, into the high-level doorways of the commercial helicopters, requiring a combined effort from the rescuers.

The efforts of the commercial helicopter pilots and crew resulted in 20 casualties being found on the crater floor, with 12 injured being removed by the commercial helicopters over the course of 40 minutes, and eight deceased repositioned for later recovery. Of the 12 people helicoptered out, 10 died.