



10 April 2008

## Speech Notes

### 2007 Search and Rescue Awards

I feel privileged to be part of a special occasion such as this, particularly as tonight's awards ceremony is being held on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wahine disaster.

This evening's ceremony is about honouring bravery, and, as we all know, there were countless acts of bravery on that day 40 years ago. Without those acts the tragedy would have been far greater still, and many more than 51 people would have died.

Before I say some more about the Wahine disaster, and talk about the people involved in tonight's ceremony, I want to acknowledge my Parliamentary colleagues, Search and Rescue Council chair and Transport Ministry chief executive Alan Thompson, Search and Rescue Council members, John Scobie, deputy chair of Land Search and Rescue New Zealand, Ian Coard, president of Coastguard New Zealand, and Graeme Cullen, chair of Surf Lifesaving New Zealand.

And, most of all, I want to acknowledge those we are honouring tonight, the rescuers, and also to acknowledge those of the rescued who have also been able to join us. It is great to see you all.

I am sure that as you came into tonight's function, some of you would have seen the Royal Humane Society of New Zealand special Gold Medal for the Wahine Disaster, on display in Parliament's ground floor foyer. In 1969 the Court of Directors of the Royal Humane Society presented a gold medal to then Prime Minister Sir Keith Holyoake on behalf of all the people, both known and unknown, who risked their own safety to contribute to the Wahine rescue efforts.

The Wahine disaster involved one of this country's biggest search and rescue missions, and our modern Search and Rescue system owes a great deal to the lessons learnt from that day. There were 734 people on board the Wahine when it hit Barrett's Reef in some of the worst

weather conditions imaginable, and, as I said, the death toll of 51 would have been many more had it not been for the efforts of the emergency services and volunteers involved.

I understand we have several very special guests here tonight who were involved in that magnificent rescue effort.

Jim Imlach and Carl Muollo both skippered fishing vessels that plucked people out of the sea, while Douglas Newey skippered one of the rescue tugs out on the harbour that day, pulling many people out of the water himself.

Thank you all for being here, and thank you and your crews for your efforts on that day, and I would like to ask those people and any others here today – rescuers, passengers and Wahine crew --- to please step forward so that everyone here can join me in applauding what you did on April 10 those 40 years ago.

Search and Rescue in New Zealand is unique in that more than 90 percent of the 10,000 people involved in rescue operations are volunteers who offer their time and expertise for little more than a thank you at the end of the day.

Not only that, rescuers often put their own safety at risk to go to the aid of a total stranger. There are few acts of humanity more selfless. For those being rescued, the hand that reaches out to them when all hope seems lost is a moment that can never be forgotten.

This Government is very keen to see the high level of Search and Rescue response continue, and is committed to supporting Search and Rescue to enable it to remain sustainable into the future. It is my hope that by working together in this way we will continue this immensely valuable service.

I am delighted to be able to take the opportunity tonight to announce that Search and Rescue in New Zealand will receive an additional \$8.4 million of Government funding over the next two years, starting in July -- - nearly doubling the present amount the sector receives through direct Government funding.

This additional funding will help sustain the Search and Rescue sector, and improve its capacity for co-ordinating and responding to

large and difficult incidents. It will also mean more opportunities for training and joint exercises to improve interagency co-operation and understanding.

I want to draw special attention to the fact that \$2.7 million of this money will be allocated per year to the 9000 strong volunteer component of the sector. This will allow the core volunteer search and rescue organisation the ability to plan strategically for the future, ensuring the continued high level of co-ordination and response.

It is also the Government's intention that long term funding for the sector after the next two years will become available through the Land Transport Management Amendment Bill, which is due to be passed before July.

This means a portion of the fuel excise paid by recreational boaties can be accessed through the National Land Transport Fund for boating safety education, maritime safety services and assisting search and rescue.

This will provide co-ordinated and long term certainty for the provision of these services into the future, offering greater stability for the voluntary sector of Search and Rescue while adding robustness to recreational boatie safety.

These two initiatives will ensure the long term future of Search and Rescue in New Zealand, so it can continue not only to be a service people can rely on, but a service that can look to the future with greater certainty and the confidence to respond to whatever emergency situation comes to pass.

And now I want to tell you a little about tonight's awards.

The Search and Rescue Council established a national award in 2000 to recognise achievement in the field of Search and Rescue. The 'New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Award' has only been presented twice before, so it's great to be presenting it again tonight.

I'm also pleased to present a new award this year, the 'New Zealand Search and Rescue Certificate of Achievement'. Both the Gold Award and the Certificate offer formal public recognition to recipients as well as raising awareness of Search and Rescue.

I will also presenting another award this evening – the International Maritime Organisation ‘International Bravery Award’ which, in its inaugural year, has unsurprisingly gone to a Kiwi!

The ‘2007 New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Award’ is for the most significant contribution to search and rescue in New Zealand, and this year is shared by three incredible young women.

In January 2007, at Pukehina Beach in the Bay of Plenty, lifeguards Lilah Foote, Rebekah Gee and Briar Macken saw a boat capsize attempting to cross the Pukehina Bar.

The three didn’t hesitate to spring into action and while Briar supervised from shore, maintaining radio contact with rescue services, Lilah and Rebekah launched their Inflatable Rescue Boat and navigated their way through choppy surf to the overturned boat.

Only one of the occupants of the boat had managed to get free, while another four people, including two small children, remained trapped underneath in the boat’s cabin.

Lilah and Rebekah both dived under the boat to attempt a rescue, but as visibility was poor and the occupants were firmly trapped in the cabin, they quickly reassessed the situation and decided to spin the boat around and co-ordinate themselves and two volunteers to lift one side of the boat using the force of the waves.

When the next wave came in the boat was able to be lifted high enough to drag everyone clear. Thanks to the efforts of these young women all five occupants of the boat made it to shore with only minor injuries after being trapped for a terrifying 20 minutes.

This rescue was possible because of the skill, teamwork and leadership displayed by Lilah, Rebekah and Briar. Each lifeguard had to make quick decisions under pressure with no margin for error. Their dedication to their jobs and commitment to their training served them well. If they had not responded in the way they did there could have been four lives lost. Congratulations Briar, Lilah and Rebekah – this award is thoroughly deserved.

The next award is for the '2007 New Zealand Search and Rescue Certificate of Achievement'. It is being awarded for the first time this year and recognises a group of people that have made an important contribution to Search and Rescue in New Zealand.

This year it goes to the team of 'Operation Brewer'. 'Operation Brewer' involved the rescue of Dr Michael Brewer from the Middle Earth Caving System in Takaka. Dr Brewer was 3km inside the system when a rock fall threw him from the rock face he was climbing, leaving him with head injuries and a fractured pelvis and ribs.

The technical skill required to rescue Dr Brewer was extraordinary given the combination of his injuries, the constricted space of the cave system, and the distance he was from the surface when he fell.

Added to the complications were the artificial lighting and communications systems that had to be set up before the rescue could even begin. In short, this rescue certainly gave new meaning to the term 'caught between a rock and a hard place'!

The rescue itself, led by Police, lasted 70 hours, included 29 hours of stretcher carrying and required the co-ordination of 98 rescue personnel. The mission included members from the Speleological Society, Search and Rescue NZ, the Fire Brigade and the New Zealand Army.

Such a large scale operation in such an inaccessible place made this rescue out of the ordinary. But what also made this rescue unusual was the distance many people travelled in order to assist – some from as far as Auckland and Invercargill. This is the nature of people who give their time to Search and Rescue.

As Michael Brewer said himself, he felt he was at the end of 'a long tunnel of increasing despair'. Those who contributed to getting him out were most certainly the light at the end of that tunnel.

Well done team 'Operation Brewer', you should be justifiably proud of your effort.

The final award this evening is the International Maritime Organisation 'International Bravery Award'. This award is conferred on individuals

who perform acts of bravery to save a life at sea, and as I said earlier, in its inaugural year, it has gone to a New Zealander.

In April 2007, while fishing off Cape Palliser on the Wairarapa coast, commercial fisherman Brett Churcher and his crew picked up the words “May Day” and “Lake Ferry” on his marine radio.

Using his local knowledge, Brett and his crew quickly filled in the gaps in the information and made for the entrance to the lake 15 nautical miles away. They soon came across an upturned dingy, but discovered no signs of life.

Using the skills he had learnt at a recent Search and Rescue training day, Brett began an expanding box search, and with the assistance of his crew, found Scott Tulloch and his four-year-old daughter Lucy drifting in the sea.

The crew plucked the pair out of the water and looked after them until they were airlifted to hospital. Scott and Lucy had been in the water for over an hour. If they had been in the sea much longer, their chances of survival would have been very slim. Thanks to the quick actions and initiative of Brett and his crew, two lives were saved.

As Brett was unable to travel to London for this award, it was accepted on his behalf by the NZ High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, so I am delighted to have the opportunity to present the award formally to him tonight.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that without people such as those of you here tonight putting your hand up to help, many lives would be lost.

More than 2000 Search and Rescue missions are carried out in and around the country each year; and while the rescues I have mentioned tonight deserve special recognition, I also want to acknowledge the huge community effort that goes into saving so many other lives.

Search and Rescue in New Zealand has a long history, and the sector as a whole has worked together to gain valuable knowledge from each mission.

I want to thank you again for inviting me to join you for this special occasion, and to thank you even more warmly for the service you provide.

*I would now like to call upon the chair of the New Zealand Search and Rescue Council, Alan Thompson, to invite tonight's award recipients to the stage.*