

Speech to New Zealand Search and Rescue Awards

Good evening everyone.

I am delighted to be part of these Search and Rescue Awards recognising our society's unsung heroes - those people who have, and will in the future, save many of us from critical situations. It's great to see so many people at this event tonight.

I would like to acknowledge my Parliamentary colleagues, New Zealand Search and Rescue Council Chair and Transport Ministry Chief Executive Martin Matthews, and his fellow New Zealand Search and Rescue Council members. I also want to welcome Graeme Cullen, President of Surf Life Saving New Zealand, Phil Melchior, President of Land Search and Rescue New Zealand and Ian Coard, President of Coastguard New Zealand.

This evening's ceremony is not only about honouring the bravery and commitment of the award recipients, it is also an opportunity to acknowledge the wonderful work of all the individuals involved in New Zealand's Search and Rescue sector.

About Search and Rescue

Search and rescue operations are not easy - they often involve long and irregular hours, witnessing traumatic events, and for the rescue team, putting their own safety at risk to go to the aid of a total stranger.

These risks became very real on the fourth of March this year, when five crew members from Coastguard Tutukaka were injured when their rescue vessel struck rocks in adverse weather conditions. While three of the crew suffered minor injuries, the other two members sustained serious head and facial injuries. I would like to pass on my best wishes to the crew members and their families, and wish them all a speedy recovery.

Despite the risks, over 11,000 New Zealanders are involved with search and rescue every year. What's more, 90 percent of these people are volunteers. In fact, New Zealand Search and Rescue, which is called out to more than 2,000 incidents each year, has one of the highest rates of volunteer involvement in the world. I thank you, personally, and also on behalf of the government, for this service.

Funding announcement

The government is committed to ensuring New Zealand has an effective and affordable Search and Rescue sector available to New Zealanders and its visitors.

At last year's Awards, my predecessor Annette King announced an interim funding package for the sector. I would like to take the opportunity tonight to confirm that I am working on replacement funding arrangements to ensure funding continuity when the interim package expires next year. As many of you will already know, the Land Transport Management Act now allows for some of the fuel excise paid by boaties to be used to fund specified safety activities, most notably search and rescue.

This funding is being made to help maintain the Search and Rescue sector, increasing its capacity to respond to large and complex incidents. It also provides more training opportunities along with joint inter-agency exercises.

Over half of this money is allocated each year to supporting the sector's 10,000 volunteers. This allows Search and Rescue to plan strategically for the future, and continue to produce the high quality work that New Zealanders have come to appreciate.

About the awards

And now to tonight's awards.

The New Zealand Search and Rescue Council has two annual national awards to recognise worthy achievements in the field of Search and Rescue.

I will be presenting the 'New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Award' for the most significant contribution to Search and Rescue and two 'New Zealand Search and Rescue Certificates of Achievement' for important contributions to Search and Rescue.

Both the Gold Award and the Certificate offer formal, public recognition to recipients as well as raising community awareness of Search and Rescue.

New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Award

Now to the major award of the evening.

The '2008 New Zealand Search and Rescue Gold Award' honours the most significant contribution to Search and Rescue in New Zealand. This award has only been given three times before, so it's great to be presenting it again tonight. This year it is awarded to a well-known and respected member of the Search and Rescue sector, John McLellan of Moeraki.

John has been a key player in marine Search and Rescue in North Otago for a very long time. In fact, he has been involved for so long that no one is able to tell me when he started! However, a very reliable source, namely John himself, informs me that it will be 55 years this September.

It was after an incident off the Oamaru coast 55 years ago that John decided he could assist with what was then called 'Air-Sea Rescue'.

The most significant of John's many contributions to the Search and Rescue sector is funding his own marine radio station. John and his wife Pauline have spent many hours every day monitoring both marine VHF and HF channels.

John was the Chairperson of North Otago Search and Rescue for many years. He was a founding member of this organisation, which replaced the local 'Air-Sea Rescue' group. John only retired from the role of Chairperson under two years ago. Derek Beveridge, the new chairperson, can not be here tonight but he passes on his congratulations.

Rather than going further on John's many achievements, I would like to instead read out a few words about John from his colleagues and peers.

Brian Benn of the Dunedin Police had this to say:

"It is always reassuring to hear his voice on the radio. We know we have the support we need when we go out on a mission and John is the local incident controller."

Graham Gale, Helicopter pilot, has said:

"John is always clear, precise and organised. He is 100 percent dedicated to the volunteer operation - and you can rely on him 100 percent of the time."

But I think the following comments from rescued person Murray Double truly sums up the humanity people see in John:

"It was not just his voice on the radio which was so helpful, but also the utterly competent way that he addressed the physical and emotional state of a bedraggled shipwreck victim...Thanks to the dedicated work of volunteers such as John, the local marine network is a tremendous help to those in need. He's a person who goes out of his way to help others, for no reason other than that they needed help."

John, you are a worthy recipient of the Search and Rescue Gold Award. I sincerely thank you for your years of service to North Otago Search and Rescue. It is clear you are respected and admired in the sector, and that your dedication, selflessness, and professionalism over the last 55 years have saved countless lives. Congratulations.

New Zealand Search and Rescue Certificates of Achievement

And now to the two Certificates of Achievement which recognise people, groups or organisations that have made an important contribution to search and rescue in New Zealand.

The first Certificate of Achievement is awarded to a helicopter crew that rescued two crewmen who had been forced to abandon their fishing vessel.

Early on Sunday 27 July 2008, the Youthtown Trust Rescue helicopter in Taupo was advised that a vessel was transmitting an emergency signal east of Opotiki.

The Youthtown Trust Rescue helicopter crew - pilots John Funnell and Hendry De Waal, Senior Constable Barry Shepherd, and Advanced Paramedic Graeme Harvey, were asked to recover four people known to be onboard the fishing vessel San Cuvier.

Arriving at the scene in terrible weather conditions, the team located two of the crew at the bottom of a vertical rock cliff in tight ravines. The steep rock face made it too difficult for winching so Graeme Harvey was lowered on a 70 metre long line to recover both survivors.

Tragically the other two members of the fishing vessel did not survive the incident. After a heroic attempt to recover both bodies and a close call for Graeme Harvey who was struck by a large wave, the team managed to recover one person.

This rescue was possible because of the skill and bravery displayed by these four men - they had to fly in very difficult conditions, rescue people in rugged terrain, and call on their specialist search and rescue skills. The crew had to make critical decisions under pressure, and the expertise and commitment each brought to the team served them well.

Congratulations, Senior Constable Barry Shepherd, Graeme Harvey, Hendry De Waal and John Funnell - this award is thoroughly deserved.

The next Certificate of Achievement goes to a man for his extraordinary technological achievements, which have undoubtedly prevented the need for countless search and rescue operations.

Kevin O'Sullivan has made a significant contribution to Coastguard New Zealand. His involvement with the organisation dates back at least 35 years, and he has instigated and delivered a number of initiatives during that time.

Of particular note are Kevin's efforts with the Coastguard's automated weather broadcasting and the establishment of local communications. Kevin is acknowledged as the 'father' and leading promoter of the continuous weather and 'NowCasting' service which is currently being rolled out nationwide.

This NowCasting service was commissioned in the Hauraki Gulf in 1983 and has been operating for 25 years. Broadcasting a continuous weather forecast and relevant safety information, it has been acknowledged as one of the greatest assets and services that Coastguard provides. Tens of thousands of boaties use the service every year - a number of whom may not be alive today if it were not for the service.

Kevin has already been acknowledged by Coastguard New Zealand for his long service, but tonight New Zealand Search and Rescue would also like to extend its gratitude to him.

Thank you Kevin for your mammoth contribution to Coastguard and the New Zealand boating public. You developed a world class NowCasting automatic weather service for the maritime community which has no doubt saved many lives. As Kevin is unable to be here tonight, his Certificate of Achievement will be accepted on his behalf by his colleague John Cowan.

Conclusion

Thank you again for inviting me to share this special occasion with you.

While the people 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 members demonstrate incredible acts of humanity by assisting those who are in trouble. To paraphrase a comment made earlier about one of the award recipients, these people go out of their way to help others for no other reason than that they need help. To me, that sums up what Search and Rescue is about.

Thank you.