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California National Guard 40th Combat Aviation Brigade CH-47 and UH-60 Blackhawk Crews Named Recipient of HAI's Salute to Excellence Humanitarian Service Award

Alexandria, Virginia (March 5, 2021) – Helicopter Association International (HAI) is pleased to announce the California National Guard 40th Combat Aviation Brigade CH-47 and UH-60 Blackhawk Crews are the 2021 recipients of the association's Humanitarian Service Award. The award, sponsored by Sikorsky, honors the person or persons who best demonstrate the value of helicopters to the communities in which they operate by providing aid to those in need.

On the evening of Sep. 5, 2020, the rapidly growing Creek Fire in the Sierra Nevada Forest northeast of Fresno, California, had surrounded a large group of campers, hikers, and residents, leaving no avenue for escape.

Without assets to reach these stranded people, the Madera County Sheriff's Office called for support from the California National Guard 40th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB). The most deployed unit of the California National Guard, the 40th CAB also provides considerable support to Cal Fire (a department of the California Natural Resources Agency) during the state's ever-growing fire seasons, employing its CH-47 Chinook and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters for transport and water-bucket drops.

Chief Warrant Officer 5 (CW5) Kipp Goding was at home when he got the call for help from his brigade commander. There was a situation developing near the Mammoth Pools Reservoir, the commander told Goding. People needed to be airlifted to safety.

Goding, a Black Hawk pilot-in-command based out of Fresno, began calling his phone tree and quickly put together a crew that included pilot Chief Warrant Officer 2 (CW2) Irvin Hernandez and crew chief Warrant Officer 1 Ge Xiong. At the same time, the brigade commander had reached Chinook pilot-in-command CW5 Joseph Rosamond, who then started making calls to pull together his Stockton, California-based crew: pilot CW2 Brady Hlebain, flight engineer Sgt. George Esquivel, and flight engineer Sgt. Cameron Powell.

What followed was a harrowing night that tested the limits of the crews and aircraft alike. An inferno fueled by bone-dry vegetation, bark beetle-killed trees, and strong winds, the Creek Fire was unpredictable, creating so much smoke the pilots couldn't see to fly through it.

After navigating around Cal Fire airspace closed due to active tanker drops, the helicopters were forced to wait an hour until sunset when night-vision goggles gave them the advantage to see through the smoke.

Rosamond's Chinook arrived first, landing on a concrete boat ramp at the reservoir's edge as the fire burned all around. The flight engineers triaged people, prioritizing those with the worst injuries.

HUMANITARIAN SERVICE AWARD

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“These people were in flip-flops and Bermuda shorts, dressed to enjoy the Labor Day weekend,” Goding recalls. “They had burns, broken bones, difficulty breathing, and bad scrapes.”

The two helicopters each flew three flights, rescuing a total of 242 people and a significant number of pets from the blaze.

“It was really brutal,” Goding says. “We’d return to Fresno, refuel, and head back. In that time, the fire was in a new position. During the day, the wind made it jump over vegetation, leaving green spots. After sunset, the wind died down a bit, and the fire started burning those previously unburned areas. As a result, we were forced to find a new route to the reservoir each time we returned. No two trips were the same route.”

The crews pushed the limits of the aircraft in the high altitude and fire-fueled temperatures. Each aircraft reached maximum weight at some point during the night, yet mechanics back at Fresno inspected the aircraft and were able to give the green light to continue.

“In many ways, this was much worse than flying in combat,” Goding recalls. “In combat, you don’t see people shooting at you. You focus on the job. In the Creek Fire, you saw the wall of smoke and flames. You were flying into it and seeing the terror on people’s faces. We did the job, just as any of our guard members would. I really want to emphasize that. We may be the ones that did this job, but we’re all doing these jobs every day.”

HAI recognized previous recipients of the Salute to Excellence Awards through events at HAI HELI-EXPO[®], the association’s annual trade show. Because of the pandemic, HAI is acknowledging the achievements of this year’s recipients through a variety of virtual events, including a series of webinars relevant to the subject of each award. Each individual recipient or team will also receive a trophy and publicity surrounding their work.

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HAI is the professional trade association for the international helicopter industry. HAI members represent more than 3,000 aviation businesses and individuals who safely operate more than 4,500 helicopters approximately 2.3 million hours each year in more than 73 nations. HAI is dedicated to the promotion of the helicopter as a safe, effective method of commerce and to the advancement of the international helicopter community.