

A salute to the lifesavers in the sky

GOVERNMENT FLYING SERVICE

As its courageous officers routinely risk their lives in dangerous search and rescue missions, the Government Flying Service (GFS) has won a special place in the hearts of Hong Kong people.

The dedication of the men and women of the GFS has also won admiration in the international arena.

“That feat of courage and heroism, conducted while selflessly risking their own lives, is just one example of the dedication to excellence that the Government Flying Service of Hong Kong brings to every call of distress.” – “Rotor”, the official publication of the Helicopter Association International (HAI).

Impressed by the exemplary GFS spirit in saving lives, the HAI awarded the department the “2002 Igor I Sikorsky Award for Humanitarian Service” at its 42nd annual “Salute to Excellence” Awards. The GFS’s successful rescue missions during severe tropical storm Hagupit in September, 2002, won deep admiration from the HAI.

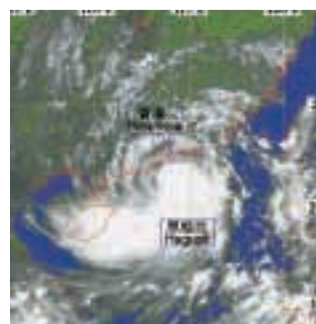
On September 11, 2002, “Hagupit” (the Philippines word for lash) swept through the South China Sea and edged towards Hong Kong, capsizing and sinking fishing boats on its way. The No. 8 typhoon signal was hoisted. More than 40 flights were cancelled and many airliners diverted their flights from Hong Kong to other airports.

Flying through the eye of the storm

While their fellow Hong Kongers hurried home to shelter and safety, GFS Aircraft Commander Captain Karl Chan, co-pilot West Wu, winch operator Benny Chan and winchman Ray Chang lifted off from Hong Kong International Airport in their Super Puma helicopter. They were on a mission to save lives.

Weather conditions deteriorated rapidly as the helicopter headed for a fishing vessel in distress. The crew flew for 30 minutes in atrocious weather with wind speeds gusting at 70 knots and visibility at times reduced to 100 metres by torrential rain.

Controller, GFS Captain Brian Butt (right) receives the award from HAI Chairman Elling Halvorson.



Severe tropical storm Hagupit with a maximum wind speed of about 110km/h near its centre.

“The weather radar showed the storm centre was between us and the stranded fishing vessel,” Captain Chan said. “As captain of the aircraft, I had to decide on the route. To save time, I decided to fly a straight course through the eye of Hagupit.”

While time and fuel are of paramount importance in any rescue mission, flying through the eye of the storm can be done only with great skill, careful manoeuvring and, above all, courage.

“With 12 years’ flying experience, I know the dangers of flying through the eye of a storm. But this was the shortest route, and it was worth taking the risk. At that moment, life and death were not in my mind.”

“The turbulence, the gale and the downpour hit us hard. Our helicopter was tossed up inside the wall of cloud and I had to grip the control lever firmly. If not for the fastened seatbelts, we would have been thrown to the ceiling.”

The Chinese fishing vessel was finally located 75 nautical miles southwest of Hong Kong. Torrential rain was pounding down and the boat was jerking violently up and down in the mountainous seas. The crew lowered the strop using the hi-line method to airlift the stranded fishermen to safety.

With poor visibility of between one and two kilometres, and 50-foot waves, Captain Chan hovered at a high altitude. Twelve fishermen were rescued. The remaining two fishermen mistakenly tied the cable onto the railing of their boat, which was rocking in the high seas, endangering the safety of all those on board the helicopter. Fuel was running low, but the crew still fought to bring the two remaining fishermen on board.



A Super Puma helicopter is picking up a person in distress during a search and rescue exercise.

Resourceful under extreme pressure

While Captain Chan’s crew was flying out on its rescue mission, another GFS crew was searching for a sinking Hong Kong fishing vessel. Nine fishermen were fighting for their lives in pounding seas with the sky darkening overhead.

Braving thunder, lightning and poor visibility, a GFS Jetstream 41 fixed-wing aircraft, acting as the search aircraft, made its way through layers of cloud and heavy rain. It finally located the distressed boat and informed the helicopter to carry out the rescue. Aircraft Commander Captain Tom Tang, co-pilot Libby Lee, winch operator Kenny Cheng and winchman Ivan Chan on board the Super Puma helicopter rushed to the scene to find the boat pitching and rolling violently. Even worse, it had a failed engine.

Because of the high waves the helicopter crew had to double the winching height from the usual 50 foot to 100 foot. The wind was blowing fiercely with a speed of 70 knots, the lowered hi-line trailed dangerously behind the helicopter and occasionally entangled with the landing gear. Winch operator Cheng had to lean out of the helicopter to untangle the line. After repeated attempts, two fishermen were rescued. But there was worse to come. The hi-line rescue ropes snapped. Although all weight packs had been used up, the resourceful helicopter crew grabbed oxygen bottles to use as substitute weights to lower the hi-line ropes to the stricken boat and finally lifted all nine stranded fishermen on board.

Co-pilot Libby Lee said he was delighted that the innovative method worked and all nine fishermen were saved. "Looking back, the vessel could have sunk at any minute. The situation was simply very perilous."

Chief Operations Officer, Captain Johnny Lee, said the Award for Humanitarian Service presented to the GFS was a global recognition of the courage and selflessness of its officers. "Hong Kong is on a par in aviation with other advanced countries like the United States and Canada," he said. "It also attests to the expertise and efforts of our highly devoted staff."

"The two crews did an excellent job. They remained calm under extreme pressure, applying their professional skills to save lives. It was a very demanding test and I am very proud of them," Captain Lee said.

Ten years of dedicated service

2003 was not only special for the GFS because of its humanitarian award – it also marked the 100th anniversary of powered flight and the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the department after its predecessor was disbanded on April 1, 1993.

GFS is committed to serving the community by providing 24-hour aviation support through dedication, teamwork and professional excellence. From 1999 to 2003, in its search and rescue missions, GFS has saved more than 1,800 lives in more than 3,000 flying hours.

The GFS provides a full range of emergency aviation services both within Hong Kong and extending out 700 nautical miles into the South China Sea. Apart from its primary role in 24-hour casualty evacuation and search and rescue operations, GFS launched a new service of roadside rescue on July 1, 2003. It provides the rapid transport of critically injured traffic accident casualties to hospital when ambulance access is hampered by chaotic traffic conditions on highways. With time of the essence in any rescue mission, helicopters are equipped with medical apparatus and GFS auxiliary medical staff can administer emergency treatment in the air.

Putting the community first

GFS is constantly striving to improve its services. Its flying section was awarded the ISO 9002 certificate for quality flying services in 1998. It was the first time that the operational element of a flying organisation anywhere in the world had been awarded this accreditation. In 2001, GFS successfully obtained the ISO 9002 corporate certificate which was upgraded to the ISO 9001:2000 version in 2003. The award recognises the commitment of GFS in maintaining a customer focus for all its services to the community in addition to meeting stringent operational and maintenance requirements.

“We are always prepared to respond to call-outs as we know emergencies are unpredictable,” Captain Lee said. “Especially in extreme bad weather, our prompt response is the key to success in saving the lives of people in great danger.”

Captain Karl Chan, who was awarded The Medal for Bravery (Bronze) in 2003, says it all: “Temporarily off duty, forever on call.”

The late Pilot I Captain Peter Pang and the late Air Crewman Officer III Dickson Chan (who was awarded The Medal for Bravery (Bronze) for his courage during Typhoon York) displayed devotion to duty of the highest order. Both these GFS officers lost their lives in the line of duty during an emergency mission on a dark night in August, 2003. Their valour and sacrifices in rescuing those in distress will not be forgotten.