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Aviation Today

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Two U.S. Air Force crews from the 21st Special Operations Squadron, based at RAF Mildenhall in the U.K., have won the British Shipwrecked Mariners' Society's Edward and Maisi Lewis Award for 2002/2003. On May 21, 2002, two of the unit's MH-53J PAVE LOW helicopters were sent to rescue two seriously injured crew members from a capsized 65-ft. yacht located some 480 nm. from Lands End. This required a 7-hr. transit, with each helicopter refueled three times by an MC-130 Hercules. The refuelings were done on a dark night with strong winds and severe turbulence. A RAF Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft tracked the capsized yacht.

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Despite 25-ft. swells, two rescue swimmers were initially put on board the yacht, but had to be withdrawn due to technical problems. Two special stretchers were then lowered to the yacht. While they were being prepared for evacuation of the two injured crewmen, the helicopter stood off to refuel. After the stretchers were wrenched back onboard the helicopter, both helicopters made for RAF St. Mawgan in Cornwall, from which the injured crewmen were taken to the hospital. The helicopters then returned to Mildenhall, arriving around mid-day after one of the longest-ranged SAR helicopter missions ever launched from the U.K.

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