

## Breitling Award for Aviation Heroism



### U.S. Coast Guard HH-60J Crew

The U.S. Coast Guard HH-60J crew that rescued an injured mountain climber off Devil's Thumb mountain in Alaska on Mar. 14, 2006, is the first recipient of the Breitling Award for Aviation Heroism.

The crew, led by aircraft commander William Timmons, included copilot Walter Horne, who was flying the aircraft, flight mechanic Karl Schickle and rescue swimmer John Houlberg, along with a three-man mountain rescue team. Dropping the team off on the mountain proved to be too dangerous an option owing to the weather.

The mission was to find and retrieve Zac Hoyt, a climber who had completed the first solo winter ascent of the 9,000-ft. Devil's Thumb on the Alaska-British Columbia border. During the descent, Hoyt fell into a crevasse at 5,000 ft. and injured his shoulder.

Soon, a U.S. Coast Guard HH-60J was on the way from Air Station Sitka with Timmons in charge. Visibility near the mountain was about 1 mi., with 45-kt. winds and 60-kt. gusts kicking up snow and a fog of ice on the surface. Finding the climber wouldn't be easy, much less hoisting him on board. The helicopter hovered 1,000 ft. above a glacier and crept forward. Eventually, the injured climber on the ground radioed that he could hear the rotor blades near him.

In a stroke of luck, visibility cleared just enough for the crew to spot the climber's yellow tent, and they marked its location on the navigation computer. This proved critical, for the rescue would take more than one try as the crew pushed their heavily loaded helicopter to the edge of its flying envelope at high altitude. Moderate to severe turbulence and limited visibility added to the challenge. Finally, after several attempts, Timmons and his crew decided to make one more pass before darkness and deteriorating weather shut down the rescue operation.

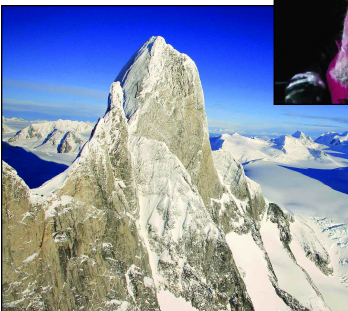
The cabin door was opened, letting the -20F air into the aircraft. The pilots used the tent and two crevasses as their only ground references as they gradually descended to hover 100 ft. off the glacier. It was a life-or-death situation for the climber—who might not have survived the night—and for the helicopter crew.



**Breitling Aviation Dept. Manager Stefano Albinati (top right) presented the Aviation Heroism award to USCG AST3 John E. Houlberg (front left), AMT2 Karl A. Schickle (center), and Lt. Cdrs. Walter L. Horne (right) and William R. Timmons (top left).**

Schickle operated the winch. The visor to his helmet soon frosted over, his hands were numb, and his eyes were watering due to the intense cold. The wind chill took the effective temperature by the open door to -100F.

On the ground, Hoyt was unable to don his boots because his fingers were frost-bitten. So he ran in his stocking feet to the rescue basket.



**Mountain climber Zac Hoyt (inset) fell after his solo climb to Devil's Thumb summit.**

The helicopter was drifting; as the basket was hoisted, it swung into an ice pinnacle and flipped on its end. Hoyt managed to stay inside it and was slowly hoisted on board the helicopter using the nearly frozen winch. Both pilots worked to maintain control of the helicopter in heavy downdrafts as the aircraft turned to fly down the glacier. Some of the avionics on the copilot's side of the cockpit began to freeze and stopped working even as the helicopter flew back into instrument conditions.

The intercom also failed, and the crew had to shout to communicate to each other. As the helicopter pulled away from the mountain, Houlberg began to treat the injured mountain climber.

Once the helicopter reached a hospital, landing also proved challenging because of blowing snow. After two waveoffs, a safe landing was made—mission complete. The crew from Air Station Sitka lived up to the service's motto, "Always ready."