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Category: Industry Innovation and Advancement

Recipients – Kestrel Aviation of Australia, Coulson Aviation of Canada and Mr Wayne Rigg from Emergency Management Victoria in Australia

Once again, the selection committee had great difficulty in selecting a winner. There were many candidates to choose from; all the candidates would be very worthy recipients of a Walt Darran Award.

This year we have taken the somewhat unusual step of making a joint award in the category of industry innovation and advancement. The 2019 Walt Darran Award for aerial firefighting innovation and advancement is presented jointly to Kestrel Aviation of Australia, Coulson Aviation of Canada and Mr Wayne Rigg from Emergency Management Victoria in Australia, for their ground breaking, collaborative work in developing safe and effective practices for aerial firefighting at night using helicopters equipped with Night Vision Goggles.

It is especially fitting to make this award jointly, as it recognises that this was a collaborative project where the organisations worked together to improve aerial firefighting and to deliver new capabilities.

Over the past two years, Coulson and Kestrel have worked with Project Manager Wayne Rigg through a series of carefully designed trials to develop the training, procedures and protocols necessary to deliver an effective capability for the suppression of wildfires at night. As a result, night firebombing operations using Night Vision Goggle equipped helicopters have now been successfully applied at many wildfires.

Wayne Rigg and representatives of Coulson and Kestrel will be the first to tell us that helicopters have previously been used for fighting fires at night, and that a great many other people and organisations were involved in developing this night firebombing capability. However, the collaborative "crawl, walk run" approach taken in this case has been essential to develop safe systems of work and to integrate an effective night firebombing capability into existing fire suppression operations. This approach has resulted in some 'first-in-the-world' achievements such as hover-filling from open water sources at night, greatly improving productivity of aerial firefighting operations. The work of this night aerial firefighting project, which builds on the experience previously gained by organisations such as the Los Angeles County Fire Department, will significantly advance the use of aircraft for effectively fighting fires at night.

But it is the collaborative approach, where different organisations worked together to improve aerial firefighting, that is very significant about this project. This provides a great pattern for future development projects.

Congratulations to Coulson Aviation, Kestrel Aviation and Wayne Rigg for working very hard, and for working together on developing night aerial firefighting.

Given the cooperative nature of this project, it seems appropriate that the joint award is presented tonight to one representative on behalf of all recipients. Mr Foster Coulson of Coulson Aviation will receive the Walt Darran award for the three joint winners.

Nîmes, 19 March 2019

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