

Australian pilot receives IMO commendation for exceptional bravery at sea

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In December 2020, Australian Pilot Captain Ritesh Bhamaria was expertly piloting oil tanker MT Godam through the Torres Strait in adverse weather conditions when he and the vessel crew sighted a distant hand waving for help in the rough sea.

AMSA News article



That movement turned out to be an uncle and nephew—both local fishermen—who had been clinging to the floating debris for close to 17 hours following the sinking of their boat, with no access to an emergency beacon or other survival equipment.

Captain Bhamaria recalled his surprise at seeing the two stranded men but wasted no time in taking action.

They struggled to maintain sight of the people, losing sight of them three times. Finally, when they caught sight of them again, the crew realised the two men were being circled by hammerhead sharks.

Rather than risking the ship's crew, by launching a rescue boat in the prevailing weather conditions and potentially not getting to the stranded fishermen in time, the pilot made the tough decision to turn the 251-metre ship around in restricted waters.

“Without hesitation, I turned the ship to the side where I had clearance,” Mr Bhamaria said.

“The two biggest issues were maintaining sight of the two men while we turned the ship around and then approached them safely—a huge ship arriving alongside a piece of wood with two men holding on, poses quite a risk to their safety.

“We couldn’t stop the ship near the survivors—the ship’s propeller would have posed too great a risk to the two men and the reef just behind them.

“On the first turn, we dropped a smoke marker with a lifebuoy as close as 20 metres from the survivors.

“The fishermen were then able to cling to the buoy, while the smoke helped the approaching rescue craft home in on the location of the survivors. Meanwhile the movement of the ship in the water deterred the sharks away from the men.

“Then we circled again, keeping the reef behind us, this time with the intention of picking them up. I manoeuvred the ship to within a distance of 1–1.5 meters of the survivors floating on the wooden plank, dropping the speed of the ship to a bare minimum—about two knots with the propellers stopped. We managed to get the uncle out of the water first. But by the time we were trying to get his nephew out, the rescue helicopter arrived, so we lowered him back into the water, so the helicopter could retrieve him safely.”

It was a harrowing ordeal for the survivors, but ultimately Captain Bhamaria’s quick-thinking and brave actions saved the lives of the two men.

These actions have now earned him a prestigious Certificate of Commendation from the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as part of their Exceptional Bravery at Sea Award.

The Exceptional Bravery at Sea Award provides international recognition for those who, at the risk of losing their own life, perform the acts of exceptional bravery and display outstanding courage. Without Captain Bhamaria’s decision making and exceptional navigation skills, these two fishermen would have endured an entirely different outcome.

AMSA Chief Executive Officer Mick Kinley said international recognition of this level of bravery from one of Australia’s marine pilots is a significant accomplishment.

“Captain Bhamaria and the ship’s crew displayed outstanding seamanship, coming together to the aid of others,” Mr Kinley said.

“The knowledge and expertise of our marine pilots is key to the safe arrival and passage of ships bringing supplies and trade with Australia. But in this instance, Captain Bhamaria’s knowledge of the surrounding area and quick thinking allowed him to make decisions that enabled the rescue of the two men.’

“Captain Bhamaria is certainly deserving of this accolade from the IMO for his exceptional bravery.”

Humbled and thankful for the honour, Captain Bhamaria was quick to share his commendation with the wider piloting community of Australia and the master and crew of the *MT Godam*.

“I am grateful and appreciative that AMSA nominated me for the award,” he said. “However, any pilot would have done the same thing, so this recognition is for the whole Australian piloting community.

“Many thanks to the master and crew of *MT Godam*, Reef VTS, AMSA and the shore Rescue team, because it was an all-round team effort,” he said.

The IMO Awards ceremony will take place virtually from IMO Headquarters in London on Monday 6 December.