



**ROYAL AIR FORCE CROSS  
PRESENTED**

**TO**

**Lieutenant WILLIAM E. SASSER  
UNITED STATES COAST GUARD**

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## RESTRICTED-HONOURS

Lieutenant William Eugene SASSER, United States Coast Guard

Place: RAF Boulmer

Date of Action or period covered by Citation: 14 December 2001

How employed: RAF Search and Rescue Pilot – Captain

Type of aircraft flown: Sea King HAR 3

During the night of 14/15 December 2001, Lieutenant Sasser, a United States Coast Guard exchange pilot, was the captain of Rescue Helicopter 131 at Royal Air Force Boulmer, having only been qualified as a captain for 6 months. With the co-pilot flying in the right hand seat, Rescue 131 was diverted to the freighter *Rosebank*, on fire with 5 souls aboard, 2 of whom had been injured fighting the fire. The Coastguard and *Rescue 131* were so concerned that the volatile cargo might explode that they had directed the *Rosebank* to head offshore.

Fire had cut off the crew from their lifeboats and survival gear, while the sea was only a few degrees above freezing. Undaunted by flames erupting from the ship's superstructure and the grave risk to his life of disastrous disorientation in the smoke, Sasser coolly and selflessly directed the inexperienced crew to fly into the billowing smoke.

Four crewmembers had been rescued and only the winchman (rescue swimmer) and ship's captain remained on deck when, unable to hover safely, *Rescue 131* was forced away. The smoke had thickened until only the foremast and a small section of the bow could be seen. Unable to tell the winchman to attempt to jump clear, Sasser courageously led his crew back into danger. With the potentially explosive cargo only feet away and the proximity of the flames evident through the engulfing smoke, he pushed the aircraft lower. He was undeterred by the extreme difficulty of the operation or the knowledge that the slightest error in judgment could have killed them all. His stubborn refusal to abandon those on deck required the aircraft to be repeatedly manoeuvred in perilous conditions until, eventually, a slight and temporary reduction in the smoke allowed the two below to be recovered.

Lieutenant Sasser's fearless leadership set a towering example of courage and devotion to his crew that inspired them to continue in conditions of grave and mounting danger, and save the lives of 5 men. His gallantry is in the highest tradition of the Royal Air Force and I strongly recommend him for the award of the Air Force Cross.

Signed:

Group Captain S O Falla, DSO

Search and Rescue Force Commander

Recommendations and Comments of Superior Commanders. The recommendation should at least be supported by the initiating officer's immediate superior and where possible an officer of 3-star rank or above.

1. Very Strongly Recommended. "An immensely impressive and courageous performance".  
Rear Admiral Ledbetter, Air Officer Commanding, 3 Group  
11 March 2002
2. Very Strongly Recommended. "Selfless and courageous leadership of the highest order.  
Worthy of the lasting recognition of an Air Force Cross".  
Sir John Day, Air Chief Marshall, Commander in Chief Strike Command  
11 March 2002
3. Award approved by HM the Queen  
17 Oct 2002



Aftermath M/V Rose Bank



Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II  
Presenting The Royal Air Force Cross  
To  
Lieutenant WILLIAM E. SASSER, USCG  
At  
Investiture, Buckingham Palace, London, U.K.



LT Sasser & Family with Beefeater Guards at Buckingham Palace

One of the Beefeaters had been serving the Royal Household for 20 plus years and he said LT Sasser was the first American he had ever seen come through an Investiture Ceremony. The Beefeaters are Royal Ceremonial Guards for the Queen and are all former Military Warrant Officers selected for this special honours duty.