Remarks by Mark Penn
Medal award ceremony, 4 June 2009, Washington, DC

Thank you, (Superintendent Manderson)

Your Excellency Roy Ferguson, Rear Admiral Jack Steer, Commodore David Anson, Superintendent Sandra Manderson, Brigadier General Joseph Callahan, distinguished guests, medal recipients, ladies and gentlemen . . . .

It gives me great pleasure to be among you today, especially those of you who were in the Antarctic with me, nearly 30 years ago. I am especially proud to be a part of this award ceremony to honour the Americans who gave such extraordinary service to New Zealand's efforts to recover those who were lost in the Erebus air crash in 1979.

For those of you who were too young at the time or too distant from this event, let me begin by giving you some background. The accident occurred on the 28th of November 1979, exactly 50 years after members of the American Antarctic Expedition, commanded by Admiral Richard E. Byrd, completed that historic flight to the South Pole and back. In fact, at the time of the crash, preparations were underway at McMurdo base to celebrate this achievement. Instead, US personnel and aircraft were diverted to search for the Air New Zealand flight that went missing somewhere over the Antarctic continent. Flight TE 901 was a McDonnell Douglas DC 10 carrying 257 souls on a one-day non-stop tourist flight from New Zealand to the Antarctic and back. It was billed as the "ultimate day trip"; it was a unique opportunity to view the stark grandeur of the frozen land mass and Ross Island, with its smoking volcanic cone of Mt. Erebus rising 12,000 feet right out of the sea. How and why this flight flew into Mt. Erebus remains unclear, although white-out conditions are assumed to be the main reason. Those on board were from many countries, including New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Switzerland, Canada, and New Caledonia. With little warning, TE 901 crashed into the northern face of Mt. Erebus, killing all 257 people on board. It was New Zealand's worst national disaster and the fourth worst air crash worldwide at that time.

When it became evident that the flight was missing, the United States Navy launched an aerial search of the area in Antarctica, near Ross Island. Commander Victor Pesce (now Captain), who is present today, flew the C-130 Hercules that found the downed aircraft on the slopes of Mt. Erebus. From the very moment the US Navy launched its search, the American assistance to New Zealand in the recovery operation was unstinting, generous and extensive. For that we will always be grateful. [*pause*]

From a personal perspective, my involvement began on the morning after the accident. As a uniformed police sergeant, I had just finished cross-examining a witness in a case I was prosecuting in the Magistrate's Court in Christchurch, New Zealand, when my boss appeared next to me, interrupted the proceedings by approaching the Magistrate, and said, "You will be aware, sir, there has been an air crash. The plane has been found in the Antarctic. We have to send a recovery team and Sergeant Penn is going down. Can he be excused?" With his agreement, my boss took over the case and within an hour or so

I was at the airport where a Royal New Zealand Air Force C130 Hercules was loading. It was the beginning of the two most arduous weeks of my life.

The New Zealand Police organized the recovery effort, sending down to the US McMurdo base 11 policemen along with crash investigators and mountaineers. As we flew past Mt. Erebus on our approach, those of us on board crowded around the portholes and saw from a great distance the black smudge of the crash site smeared against the white mountainside. Once we landed at McMurdo the US Navy billeted us in their barracks, and we then began a familiarization program to learn about climatic conditions and survival in the Antarctic environment. My colleague, Sgt. Greg Gilpin, and I led two teams, with a total of 10 policemen, who were sent to the site for over a week. We were joined by 5 US Navy personnel, who were there to assist us. Our task was to photograph, number, record and pack into body bags, all bodies and pieces of human remains on the site. The site, about 700 yards long and 200 yards wide, was on a moderate slope of a glacier on which there were a number of crevasses. It was at an elevation of about 1500 feet. By the time the police teams arrived at the site, a New Zealand team from Scott base had been flown in by the US Navy and had set up a helicopter pad and a camp of polar tents, where we would live for the following week or so.

Apart from some big chunks of wreckage, including the tail, the engines and the main fuselage, there was not much of the plane left. The surrounding area looked like a ploughed paddock in snow. Everything had been ground up, with the look of papier mache, and dispersed among this were human bodies and pieces of bodies. It was a grim scene. The sun circled overhead 24 hours a day, which afforded us the ability to work 24 hours a day in full light. Sgt. Gilpin and I each led a team, organized into two shifts of 12 hours working around the clock. Typically, the 12 hours "on" were spent on body recovery work, and the 12 hours "off" were spent on record keeping, eating, sleeping, and coordinating with the next shift and others on site. The work was physically exhausting, and psychologically debilitating.

Let me give you a brief look at what was involved . . . Some of the bodies seemed miraculously whole; others charred beyond recognition; still others had the appearance of being whole but crumbled to fragments when handled. We tried to move as much metal as possible to extricate all bodies and human pieces trapped underneath but couldn't always get under the bigger sections of wreckage. We abseiled down the glacial crevasses to ensure there were no bodies there. When we arrived we had very little water on site and insufficient fuel to melt snow and ice. As a result we had only one bowl of water for all of us to wash our hands in. The water was soon black. In the first days on site we did not wash plates and utensils after eating but handed them on to the next shift to use. For the first day I couldn't eat but after that hunger and the survival instinct must have taken over. Not changing clothes, nor washing, shaving or brushing teeth for the duration of the time on the site, we became covered with black human grease from the charred bodies. The only clothing change was a fresh supply of woolen gloves brought to us by one of the supply flights from McMurdo. Our gloves had become saturated with human grease but we needed the flexibility and finger movement that wool gloves afforded for writing reports and filling out the victim identification cards.

Lifting and packing bodies into bags was heavy work. We then piled the bagged bodies onto 11 cargo nets which were spread around the crash site awaiting transport by helicopter to McMurdo, some 40 miles away. Radio communications with McMurdo were often patchy at best, and the most reliable information from the site was my handwritten daily log which I personally handed to the helicopter pilots for delivery. We ran into an unexpected problem when large Antarctic gulls, known as scuas, began to peck at the exposed bodies and tore open the bags. This was devastating to our morale, and we decided the only way to protect the bodies was to bury them under a shallow covering of snow which we scraped off the surface of the glacier. This covering of snow quickly froze, which made it heavy and hard to break through when we were ready to move the bodies out. As we were nearing the end of our task, the weather closed in for a couple of days. When it lifted, we worked frantically to remove all the bodies, property, people, tents and equipment, as we tried to keep up with the helicopters flying constantly back and forth to McMurdo. I was the last searcher off the site.

On arrival at McMurdo the Fire Chief issued us a special invitation – he escorted us to the Firehouse where we stripped naked and plunged into the firehouse reservoir, a large tank of warm water for use in firefighting. It was heavenly.

The support that you Americans, both US Navy personnel and civilians, gave us was simply magnificent, and we could not have carried out our part of this operation without your help. Speaking personally, I know that those of you who worked with us to the point of exhaustion at the crash site toiled under those trying conditions without complaint. The combined New Zealand Police-United States Navy search and recovery team, comprising 15 men, completed a huge task and recovered remains amounting to 84% identification of the 257 killed. In addition, at the site and beyond, I am aware of the extensive assistance other Americans provided – from aircraft crews, engineers, technicians and movement control personnel, to medical staff, investigators, fire officers, photographers, and public relations officers. Today the New Zealand Government is awarding the New Zealand Special Service Medal to those Americans who worked so hard and gave us such tremendous and vital support in the Antarctic on "Operation Overdue". It is for your service to New Zealand, and if it is somewhat overdue, it is most richly deserved.

Thank you.