

Adak's Giddings Receives Hero Award for Volcano Rescue

For his heroic act of bravery in the evacuation of two Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge biologists from Kasatochi Island, Albert Giddings was presented the Department of Interior's, Exemplary Act Award aboard his boat, *M/V Homeward Bound*, at Adak Island in early October. Presenting the award and offering their personal thanks were Deputy Refuge Manager Will Meeks, Aleutian Unit Manager Kent Sundseth and Supervisory Biologist Vernon Byrd. Giddings, along with his deckhand Eric Mochizuki, received the award in recognition of their courageous action involving great risk to themselves and their vessel.

On August 6, the two biologists studying seabirds on Kasatochi were experiencing frequent and increasingly intense earthquakes, indicating the possibility of an imminent eruption even though Kasatochi had no history of eruptions. Refuge staff in consultation with the Alaska Volcano Observatory decided evacuation was prudent. The refuge ship was too far away as was the Coast Guard ship. The Coast Guard helicopter at Adak was down for repairs and no fishing vessels were in the area. In desperation at about 11:00 p.m, Giddings was contacted by refuge staffer Lisa Spitler of Adak asking if he would be willing to evacuate the biologists in his 32 foot boat. This journey of about 40 miles would cross one exposed pass of rough water. Setting aside their own safety, Giddings and Mochizuki, agreed to head for Kasatochi aboard the *M/V Homeward Bound*, at first light.

Soon after Captain Giddings, and the *Homeward Bound*, departed Adak, the biologists at Kasatochi reported a nine-minute long earthquake, a strong sulfur smell, and numerous falling rocks. In spite of the risks and likelihood of volcanic eruption, Giddings and his associate continued on, taking the *Homeward Bound* close in to Kasatochi to rendezvous with the biologists and safely retrieve them from their small inflatable boat. About an hour after the *Homeward Bound* had picked up the biologists, the volcano exploded, shot an ash cloud 45,000 feet high, and buried the entire island, the refuge cabin, and near-shore waters with hot, pyroclastic ash flows. The *Homeward Bound* was by then far enough away to escape damage, and everyone arrived safely at Adak. Without Giddings' selfless and resolute response to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's call for assistance the lives of two young Service biologists stationed on Kasatochi Island may have been lost.