

THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY DECORATION (N.Z.B.D.)

Michael Ross O'LEARY Inspector, New Zealand Police

Date of action: 24 April 2009

Date of award: 2 April 2011

Citation

At 3.55 p.m. on 24 April 2009 Inspector Michael O'Leary was off duty and driving with his family along State Highway One some 17km north of Taupo when the vehicle in front of him, a Toyota van, crashed head-on with a black sedan coming the opposite way. The Toyota, which contained six people, flipped into the air, landed on its rear, and rolled four times before going off the road and down a grass embankment and bursting into flames.

Inspector O'Leary was the first person to arrive at the scene. Instructing his son, Conor, to wave down any approaching traffic, he went first to the black sedan and determined that the male driver showed no signs of life. Going to the other side, he noticed that the female passenger was semi-conscious and may have sustained a broken leg and other injuries. He told her that help was on the way, but decided not to try and remove her from the car.

Hearing an explosion he looked over to the other side of the road and saw the Toyota in flames. Inspector O'Leary crossed the road but the flames and the angle of the bank prevented him from approaching the Toyota from that side. At this time he was met by Mr Peter Booth, a motorist who had stopped to assist with a small fire extinguisher. After a few words to Mr Booth, Inspector O'Leary ran down the bank and crossed a wire fence to get to the other side of the vehicle. From there he could see two children hanging out to about chest level of what was once a window. As the flames above him were getting stronger, he pulled a two-year-old boy from the Toyota and ran about 15 metres away from the vehicle, where the child was taken by Inspector O'Leary's daughter back to their car. He then went back to the Toyota to rescue the second child, and was joined by his son, Conor.

By now the Toyota was full of dense black smoke, the flames were becoming fiercer and there were one or two small explosions from inside the vehicle. Inspector O'Leary, Conor O'Leary and Mr Booth attempted to pull the second child, a boy, free but he was held inside by what may have been his seat belt, and the flames beat them back. Determined not to let the child die, Inspector O'Leary asked if anyone had a knife. Fortunately Mr Booth had brought a pocket knife with him when he came to assist. Inspector O'Leary took it and, leaning inside the vehicle, was able to cut away whatever was restraining the child. The three of them were then able to pull the boy, whose trousers were on fire, clear of the vehicle. Inspector O'Leary ripped the burning clothes from the child and took him to a place of safety. By now the Toyota was a ball of fire and further rescues were impossible.

Although he had sustained burns himself, Inspector O'Leary continued to manage the accident scene, especially the care of the injured, until the Police and other emergency services arrived. He was then taken to hospital for treatment. Despite the horrific scene that confronted him, Inspector O'Leary displayed coolness, professionalism and exceptional bravery in the manner in which he first controlled the accident scene, and then went about attempting to rescue the people trapped inside the burning Toyota. At any time during the rescue attempts the Toyota's fuel tank could have exploded, killing or seriously injuring him, and those who were with him.