

THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY MEDAL (N.Z.B.M.)

Susan Rebecca BURKE

Date of action: 19 January 2023

Date of award: 13 December 2025

Citation

On the afternoon of 19 January 2023, a young boy was playing in the Rees River when he was pulled by the current downriver and into Lake Wakatipu, in the vicinity of Glenorchy wharf. The boy panicked when he was unable to touch the bottom or swim against the current, becoming submerged at the confluence of the river and lake.

Sergeant Harshad Ghodke, an off-duty Police officer, was nearby with his family and swam out to help the boy. He experienced a strong undertow that prevented him from swimming back with the boy, advising him to float on his back while he went to get more help. Another man on the other side of the river, Mr Jonny Young, saw Sergeant Ghodke swimming back without the boy and decided to swim out to help. Mr Young reached the boy and began pulling him, but they were separated and Mr Young stopped swimming due to exhaustion.

Sergeant Ghodke was yelling and waving, trying to attract the attention of boats on the lake. Another holidaymaker from Australia, Ms Susan Burke, was passing by and talked with Ghodke about swimming out to help. Ms Burke spotted Mr Young and the boy about 15 metres from the shore. Already in swimwear, she approached the pair, noting the water dropped off sharply around 10 metres from shore.

Ms Burke reached the boy, who was calm and floating on his back. While aware of Mr Young nearby in the water, she focused on the boy. She hooked her arm around the boy's chest and swam him towards the shore. At this time, Mr Young was around seven metres from the shore and did not signal any distress before his head went underwater and he disappeared from view. As Ms Burke returned with the boy, she became aware of people yelling "he's gone under" from the shore. As Ms Burke reached the shore, Sergeant Ghodke waded out and took the boy from her, telling her to go back out to help Mr Young.

Ms Burke swam to her prior location but could not see Mr Young. She duck-dived to see if she could see anything under the water. Two other men swam out to join her and Ms Burke ducked under the water a few more times, but was very tired by this point. The trio then agreed they couldn't see anything and stopped searching to return to shore. Back on land, Ms Burke was struggling to breathe with exercise-induced asthma and was supported by ambulance staff who arrived shortly afterwards. Mr Young had unfortunately drowned in his attempt to rescue the boy and his body was recovered the following day.

Ms Burke's actions ensured the rescue of the young boy and, while tired from her efforts, she committed to searching for Mr Young to the limit of her ability.