

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

Hayden Paul CORNWELL

Date of action: 24 January 2025

Date of award: 13 December 2025

Citation

On 24 January 2025 around 5am, a woman in distress jumped from the Boundary Road Bridge into the Waikato River. The woman survived the jump and when she resurfaced she was in a state of panic, calling out for help while being swept by the fast-moving current.

Mr Hayden Cornwell was asleep in his home, situated by the eastern side of the river. He was awoken by the woman's cries for help and quickly left the house to search for the source of distress. He located the woman in the river, realising she was at risk of drowning. After following along the riverbank for a short period of time, he jumped into the river and swam to the woman. At this point, the river was 140 metres wide. Mr Cornwell attempted to drag the woman to the eastern riverbank, but when she clung on to him it impaired his ability to swim. Mr Cornwell called out for help as he was now also struggling to remain afloat, swallowing large amounts of water and being forced underwater several times.

Constable Alexander Kerr had responded to the incident and was following the woman from along the opposite side of the river. Constable Kerr heard the calls of distress and entered the water, swimming from the western riverbank towards Mr Cornwell and the woman. Eventually, he saw the shape of Mr Cornwell in the water attempting to hold the woman up. They were very low in the water, with only their heads visible.

As Constable Kerr approached them, he grabbed hold of the woman and pulled Mr Cornwell above the water. Mr Cornwell was then able to swim back to the eastern side of the riverbank, heavily fatigued from his efforts. He pulled himself out of the water and walked up the embankment to the road to alert ambulance and Police staff who were searching the area. Mr Cornwell led other responding Police officers to where Constable Kerr had pulled the woman from the water and supported her on a ledge to stop her from slipping back in.

The woman was shivering violently and struggled to breathe due to ingested water. Mr Cornwell also began shivering and vomiting from ingesting river water. The entire rescue attempt had taken place within approximately 15 minutes and both the woman and Mr Cornwell were taken to hospital and subsequently recovered.

Mr Cornwell demonstrated bravery in entering the fast-flowing river in darkness to assist the woman, coming into trouble himself due to the conditions.