

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

KERR, Alexander James Christian Henry Constable, New Zealand Police

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.

Constable Alexander Kerr (Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Mutunga) was coming to the end of his night shift when he received reports of a woman screaming for help in the Waikato River. The woman was last heard near the Fairfield Bridge, prompting Constable Kerr and his fellow officer to go to the location, with two other Police officers in support. A Police boat was also launched to assist.

Constable Kerr arrived at the river and immediately heard the woman screaming for help. Using his torch to locate her in the darkness, he could see she wasn't swimming and being dragged almost fully submerged in the water. He, along with three other officers, ran parallel along the river path to keep a visual on her location. When she came within four metres of the riverbank, Constable Kerr removed his Police vest, climbed down a steep gully and jumped into the river. The weight of his waterlogged uniform made it difficult to surface, and when he did the woman had been swept towards the other side of the river. Constable Kerr climbed back up the gully and continued running down-river.

He noticed the woman's yells were becoming more infrequent and she was tiring, having been swept more than a kilometre. He radioed to check on the location of the Police boat. Sand banks had obstructed the boat's path, so Constable Kerr knew it could not assist.

Constable Kerr continued running along the western side of the river to a point where the land began to flatten, looking for an easier entry point into the water. He could now hear the voice of Mr Hayden Cornwell, a civilian on the eastern side of the riverbank, 140 metres away, who had entered the water to assist the woman.

The woman had quietened, making it difficult to locate her. Constable Kerr heard someone in distress on the opposite side of the river. He took off his boots, belt and shirt and waded through 50 metres of shallow mud flats before diving into the main current. He could not see anyone in the darkness and swam towards the noise, yelling that he was coming. 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 Mr Cornwell and the woman, he grabbed hold of her and pulled Mr Cornwell above the water. The woman was unable to swim, relying on Constable Kerr to prevent her from sinking. The woman wrapped both arms around Constable Kerr's neck and her weight pushed him underwater, forcing him to hold his breath until he could resurface. Eventually, he reached the river's edge, pulling the woman to the bank. Nearby, he could hear Mr Cornwell pulling himself out of the water and leaving to find help.

Constable Kerr placed the woman on a ledge slightly out of the water, supporting her so she would not fall back in. The woman was shivering violently and struggling to breathe due to ingested water.

Constable Kerr yelled to the other constables who had been following on the opposite riverbank that everyone was out of the water, and that the woman required an ambulance. When Mr Cornwell returned with another officer, the two officers helped the woman up the bank to a nearby carpark to wait for the ambulance.

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.

Constable Kerr's actions ensured the rescue of the woman, as well as Mr Cornwell who had come into trouble during his rescue attempt.