

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

George Puturangi PAEKAU

Date of action: 9 December 2014

Date of award: 1 August 2016

Citation

On the morning of 9 November 2014 a fire ignited in a house in the Hamilton suburb of Dinsdale. The house was occupied by a mother and three of her four children, who were aged between 3 and 16 years, the oldest of whom was autistic.

Mr George Paekau was driving towards his home when he saw smoke billowing from what he thought was his property. When he got closer he realised that it was from the neighbouring house belonging to his cousin. With part of the house engulfed in flames he joined other members of the public in attempting to locate the house's occupants. Mr Paekau and the others found a bedroom window ajar at the rear of the property. They heard the voice of one of the children in the room, which was filled with heavy smoke. Mr Paekau then grabbed a length of pipe and smashed the bedroom's window. Flames roared into the room, but some of the smoke also cleared. Mr Paekau saw two of the children in the room, a younger child on the floor next to the window, and the older youth on the bed. He leaned over the smashed window sill and picked up the child on the floor, passing him to the other men outside.

Mr Paekau then covered his face with a t-shirt and jumped into the room, where he shut the bedroom door, helping to slow the fire's spread. The room was still filled with thick smoke and intense heat. One of the other men climbed just inside the window and sprayed a garden hose into the room. Mr Paekau picked up the older youth from the bed, but he was too big to lift out of the broken window. The other men outside the house then entered the room and four men together assisted the older youth through the window. Mr Paekau was then assisted from the house through the broken window, at which point the Fire Service arrived and began searching for the mother and youngest child. The mother was located and survived with serious injuries, but the 3-year old died at the scene.

Mr Paekau's selfless actions and his initiative in closing the bedroom door to slow the spread of the fire allowed the men time to rescue the older youth.