

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

David Edward Whawhai STEWART (S53606)

Private, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (Deceased)

Date of action: 11 – 13 August 1990

Date of award: 23 October 1999

Citation

Privates Burchell, Stewart and Terure were members of an Army Adventurous Training Course which became trapped near the summit of Mount Ruapehu by extremely adverse weather conditions on 11 August 1990. The next morning the party decided to move from the shelter of snow caves to the Dome Shelter, a distance of approximately 400 metres. They had covered approximately 250 metres when weather conditions forced them to stop and seek temporary shelter on an exposed feature. After some time in this location, two of the party succumbed to hypothermia and the others began to make the casualties comfortable. In the afternoon, two members of the party left to attempt to get assistance. As more of the party began to show signs of hypothermia, they were placed in their sleeping bags in what shelter there was.

Despite the continuing high winds and windblown snow, Privates Stewart and Terure maintained a continual vigil over their companions throughout most of the night, providing what assistance they could. When it became obvious that assistance was required, Private Burchell, although he had no previous mountaineering experience, volunteered to accompany one of the instructors to descend the mountain. The weather conditions were still extreme with windblown snow, limited visibility, darkness and a high wind chill factor.

The pair were continually blown off course by the winds and, as a result, had to traverse treacherous terrain including several steep bluffs with limited direction finding assistance. Some eleven hours later, they eventually managed to raise the alarm to enable a full search and rescue operation to be mounted. Private Burchell not only had to cope with the most extreme conditions but, because of his lack of experience, had no knowledge of how to adequately overcome them. His courage, determination and perseverance to continue in the face of extraordinary adversity not only brought great credit on himself, but certainly assisted in the rescue of five survivors from Mount Ruapehu the next day.

When a rescue party arrived at the scene about midday on 13 August, Private Stewart was found to have died during the night. Private Stewart would have been fully aware that his actions in continually moving out of shelter and the warmth of his sleeping bag to assist those of the party who were affected by hypothermia, meant that he had an increased chance of also becoming a casualty. He was also aware that he was becoming increasingly exhausted by the continual battling of the elements. Privates Stewart and Terure displayed selfless care of the casualties and their sense of responsibility to their companions testify to their bravery.