

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

Hugo Johannes Josephus VERHAGEN

Date of action: 26 September 2000

Date of award: 14 October 2006

Citation

On 25 September 2000, Mr John Painting and his son Matthew were tramping in the Kaimanawa Ranges. At an altitude of almost 1,500 metres (5,000 feet), they were caught in what was later reported as a “50 year storm” with freezing temperatures, 70 knot winds and blizzard conditions. They were found by chance in a distressed condition and suffering from hypothermia by Mr Brian Pickering, who was on the first day of a six day journey into the Kaimanawa Forest Park. Using his skill and experience, Mr Pickering positioned the two men below the track, placed them in their sleeping bags and gave them food. He tried to wrap them with a tent to shield them from the driving wind. He then dialled 111 on his cell phone and alerted the Police to the situation.

A Search and Rescue Team was activated but were not able to be deployed until well after dark. Access to the Kaimanawa Range begins from a road end at an altitude of 680 metres, and then climbs sharply for a distance of five kilometres to the tree line at an altitude of 1,330 metres. The ‘lost party’ was a further 5.5 kilometres across the open tops of the range. These tops are rock and pumice with sparse tussock cover, and totally open to the elements. The first team to reach the tree line spent some time attempting to cross the open tops of the range, but soon became so physically exhausted by the extreme weather conditions, that they were forced to turn back to shelter at the tree line.

A second search team, consisting of Kerry Charles Palmer, the team leader, Shaun Bruce Campbell and Hugo Johannes Josephus Verhagen were deployed some time later. After three hours walking in the dark to the tree line, they ventured onto the open tops before daylight. There they struck extreme conditions, with the wind at a right angle to the ridge and blowing at approximately 70 knots. The wind was so strong that it made breathing very difficult. There was snow underfoot except for short distances where it had been blown off exposed parts of the track. Much of the snow was knee deep and progress required ‘plunging’ foot holes. Mr Verhagen was blown over several times and on one occasion was blown into a small crevasse and had to be assisted out by the other two members of his team.

At times the group had to hold each other in a huddle to avoid being blown over. After traversing approximately three kilometres along the open tops, the trio had to reconsider their position as they had doubts as to their ability to reach the stranded trampers in the extreme conditions. They decided to continue as they knew that there was a strong possibility one or more of the ‘lost party’ might die without further assistance.

On reaching the lost trampers they found that Mr Painting was in poor condition, although his son and Mr Pickering were in somewhat better condition. They were in a shallow hollow out of the wind, but otherwise in the open. They were wrapped in plastic sheets and sleeping bags which was the only material available. The team immediately set about erecting shelter, provided hot food and drinks and then helped Mr Painting and his son into warm clothes.

Some three hours later a third search team arrived on the scene and once the group was fit to move, the campsite was moved to a more sheltered spot.

By mid-afternoon the wind lessened and the three members of the second search team were able to walk out and return to their base. Other search and rescue personnel remained with the trampers as the latter were not in a fit state to move and the weather was still too bad for a helicopter rescue that day. They also knew that there may well be only a short window in the weather in which to make the helicopter pick up and only those personnel that could fit into one helicopter lift could safely remain at the rescue site. These personnel spent another night out and were recovered by the helicopter the following morning.

Although the actions of Mr Pickering had initially saved the lives of Mr Painting and his son, it is doubtful if his efforts, without adequate equipment, would have been enough to keep Mr Painting alive for the further 22 hours before rescue occurred. The efforts of the second search and rescue team probably saved the lives of Mr Painting and his son, and Mr Pickering.

Note to Citation: In January 2005, Mr Pickering was awarded The New Zealand Bravery Decoration for his part in this rescue. The three members of the first search team were each awarded the New Zealand Bravery Medal for their unsuccessful rescue attempt.