

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

Mark David WHITTAKER
Senior Firefighter, New Zealand Fire Service

Date of action: 22 February 2011

Date of award: 23 June 2014

Citation

On 22 February 2011 a magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck Christchurch, resulting in the collapse of the six-storey Canterbury Television building. A fire had ignited in the lower levels of the building, complicating rescue efforts. The fourth floor had been compressed to a space of approximately 60 centimetres high. Tunnels were created into the fourth floor to gain access to a number of survivors trapped inside. Senior Firefighter Mark Whittaker worked with three other firefighters in alternating tunnelling teams of two. The firefighters were unable to use breathing apparatus or wear helmets due to the cramped conditions. Debris had to be passed backwards along the bodies of the rescuers and down the tunnel as there was no room to turn around. Firefighters were stationed at the tunnel entrance so that when there were significant aftershocks they could quickly pull the tunnellers out by their feet. Eventually the team of tunnellers, including Whittaker, located a small group of students trapped under a beam. Two bodies had to be removed before the students could be reached. One student was trapped by her ankle and it took a long time to free her, but amputation was avoided. Another student was trapped by his head, but was pulled from beneath the beam and extracted through the tunnel. A third student could not be freed until an amputation was carried out by a civilian doctor assisted by another team of firefighters, through an access hole from above. The rescue efforts of Mark Whittaker and his team were carried out in dense smoke from the fire and under the constant threat of aftershocks.