

THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY STAR (N.Z.B.S.)

Anthony McCLEAN (Posthumous)

Date of action: 15 April 2008

Date of award: 2 April 2011

Citation

On 15 April 2008 a group of 10 students from Elim Christian College, including Anthony Mulder, aged 16, and accompanied by Anthony (Tony) McClean, a teacher, started out on a river canyoning expedition in the Mangatepopo Gorge. This was one of the activities on a school camp and was led by Ms Sullivan, an instructor from the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre (OPC). On the way back down the Gorge they became trapped by rising water in one of its narrowest points, a short distance from where the stream flows over a 7 metre-high dam.

When the party set off there was light rain falling and the stream was running at its normal volume of about half a cubic metre per second. The party did not know that heavy rain higher up in the Mangatepopo catchment area was heading for the Gorge. By the time they reached the narrow part of the Gorge above the dam, the stream was in flood and they found themselves trapped between the sheer sides of the canyon and the raging waters. With the water level rising rapidly, they took refuge on a ledge beneath an overhang, but as the water level continued to rise above knee level and the current increased, it appeared that remaining in this position was not going to be possible and they would eventually be swept away.

At approximately 3.30 p.m., Ms Sullivan, the instructor, made the decision to go down the stream. A plan was made in which she would go first and take up a position on the left bank above the dam. From there, she would throw a rope, using the "throwbag" method they had practised, to each member of the group as they came down the stream. The students were told to swim to the left side of the stream and catch the rope as they came down. The instructor would then pull them to safety.

Tony McClean was to remain with the student group and would be the last to leave the ledge. As he would be out of sight upstream, he was to release the students at five-minute intervals. This would allow time for the instructor to prepare the rope for each student. The instructor and Tony McClean agreed that those students least confident in the water would be paired with and attached to a more confident and better swimmer. All the other students were to go individually. Floyd Fernandes was paired with fellow student Anthony Mulder, and Tom Hsu was paired with Tony McClean. The instructor also decided to take one of the students, Ashley Smith, with her.

Each member of a pair was attached to the other by means of a looped sling and carabiner, or similar device, with the weaker person in front.

The instructor and Ashley Smith entered the torrent first. After being buffeted and turned around in the fast-flowing water, the instructor managed to catch hold of a rock and haul the pair of them to the safety of the bank only five metres from the top of the dam. As planned, Tony proceeded to release each student from the ledge at five-minute intervals. By the time Tony McClean and Tom Hsu were ready to leave the ledge the stream was in full flood. Tony managed to catch the rope thrown by the instructor but was unable to hold on against the force of the torrent and both he and Tom were also swept over the dam.

Throughout this ordeal, Tony McClean had remained a tower of strength. He kept to the rescue plan that had been agreed with the instructor and while the group was on the ledge he inspired each one to summon their personal courage, to face their fears and to make the jump into the waters that were racing past them just a few feet away.

Both he and Anthony Mulder were competent swimmers and would have stood a much better chance of survival if they had attempted the stream on their own, even though they had no experience of the water conditions in which they found themselves. They also knew that their friends would have little chance of survival in such conditions without assistance, but if they were tied together their own chances of survival would be significantly reduced. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate in agreeing to this part of the plan and, in acts of outstanding bravery, selflessly accompanied their friends into the torrent.

Tony McClean and Anthony Mulder were subsequently discovered some considerable distance below the dam, still attached to their friends.