

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

Adam John BROWN Corporal, Royal New Zealand Air Force

Date of action: 31 May 2021

Date of award: 6 December 2024

Citation

On the night of 31 May 2021, a Royal New Zealand Air Force NH90 helicopter was requested by Police Search and Rescue to attempt to rescue multiple people who were trapped by rapidly rising flood waters on the Canterbury Plains. The night-time conditions were difficult for helicopter operations due to heavy rain, low visibility, very strong winds and a low cloud base.

Corporal Adam Brown had the role of winch person on the crew of the responding RNZAF helicopter. They responded to a man who was trapped in a large pine tree by fast flowing and rapidly rising flood waters, who a swift water rescue team was unable to extract due to the conditions. The only option was to attempt a winch rescue by helicopter, not usually attempted for tree rescues due to entanglement risk.

Corporal Brown was lowered on the winch cable to the base of the tree in an attempt to reach the man in the branches above. Corporal Brown was suddenly submerged in the fast-flowing water and could not raise his head to catch his breath. The winch operator, having lost sight of Corporal Brown, winched him back aboard.

The man in the tree was becoming hypothermic, exhausted and increasingly unable to maintain his position. The man dived into the water to attempt to swim to safety and was swept out of view. The helicopter began searching downriver, with Corporal Brown spotting the man clinging to a submerged tree. The crew considered another winch extraction, noting the risks of fast-flowing water and the difficulty of maintaining a steady position, acknowledging the man would likely be swept away and drowned if he could not be extracted.

Corporal Brown was lowered on the winch cable, avoided being snagged on the submerged tree, and attempted to place a rescue strop over the man. As the man needed one arm to keep himself on the tree and above water, he struggled to secure himself in the strop, which would usually be placed over a person's head and under both armpits, then requiring the rescued person to support themselves. Corporal Brown determined an improvised winch technique would be required. With the man partially in the strop, Corporal Brown wrapped his arms around the man's torso in a 'bear hug' to prevent him from falling.

The helicopter crew raised Corporal Brown and the man out of the water, noticing that the man was not secure and could fall. Rather than winching them onboard, the helicopter lifted Corporal Brown and the man at a low height to a nearby riverbank, while Corporal Brown stayed wrapped around the man. The rescued man was then handed over to Police Search and Rescue personnel.