

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

Heike Pio Jan REITSMA

Date of action: 21 July 2022

Date of award: 6 December 2024

Citation

Early afternoon on 21 July 2022, two teenage boys were riding their motorbikes across familiar farmland near Whanganui and attempted to cross a fast-moving river, which had begun flooding. One boy's motorbike was pushed over by the fast-moving current, pinning him with his legs under the bike, before being slowly pulled downstream.

Mr Heike Reitsma, then 16-years-old, ran into the waist-deep river and attempted to pull the other boy out, but the weight of the bike and the current prevented the boy from being freed. The current was getting stronger, and it was difficult for the trapped boy to keep his head above the rising water. Mr Reitsma tried to pull the bike off his friend, before attempting unsuccessfully to pry the boy's boots off to free his legs.

Mr Reitsma instructed his friend to turn over to create an eddy and a gap for him to breathe. Mr Reitsma then ran up a hill to find reception to contact emergency services. As reception kept cutting out, he kept repeating his location. Mr Reitsma made multiple trips back to the river, entering the water to try to lift the bike or pull the boy out, and running back up the hill to retry emergency services. By this time, the boy was submerged, becoming hypothermic, exhausted, and unable to hold his head above water.

The now chest-deep water shifted the motorbike, freeing the boy's legs and washing him further down the river. Mr Reitsma heard the boy yelling and spotted him downstream holding onto a bush by the riverbank. Mr Reitsma crossed the river via a fallen tree and pulled the boy out of the water. Mr Reitsma removed the boy's clothing and gave him his own clothing – at this time the boy was losing consciousness. Mr Reitsma then ran around a kilometre to the main road to guide Police officers to the scene.

Mr Reitsma's repeated efforts to enter the flooded river to ensure his friend could breathe and attempt to free him was key to a successful rescue, with the boy being located and treated by emergency services and evacuated by helicopter.