

SSAANZ: Peace in the outdoors

David Benfell found peace in the outdoors. Maybe it was from the wide-open space, the fresh air, the sounds of a river or a stream, the texture of the tussock or the splash of a wave – maybe it is all these things – whichever it is, it’s good for Dave’s soul and he knew that it would be good for other veterans.

Dave served for 5 years in the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment and then a further 9 years in the British Armed Forces, in the 3rd Battalion Parachute Regiment. A training accident in Britain added to his feeling that it was time to return to New Zealand. Back home he found it hard to integrate into civilian life and experienced feelings of isolation and mental health issues. It was the outdoors that helped him.

“I got through the dark periods by going into the wild. Tramping or hunting, they worked for me.”

He began tramping with friends, and soon found that he was tramping with other veterans and they were all having a good time. Dave asked himself, “Could this work for other veterans?”

In 2018 Dave established Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen’s Association of New Zealand (SSAANZ) for any serving (no fees or subscriptions for serving members) and former members of New Zealand Defence Force either Regular or Territorial. The trustees are all veterans. This was an organisation set up by veterans, run by veterans for veterans (and their families).





A SSAANZ fishing trip

SSAANZ has filled an important role. Since 2018, SSAANZ has run 30 outings, taking over 300 veterans (and family members) on tramps, survival courses, hunting and hunting courses, scuba diving and chartered fishing trips.

All costs are subsidized by the charity and supporters. However, SSAANZ goes further for veterans that don't have many resources. SSAANZ not only keeps the charges down, but through support of suppliers and a wider support community, they can offer some places on every tramp or course to veterans for free.

“It’s important to the trustees to make our events available to all veterans, and to be there for everyone.”

SSAANZ aims for an event each month. At the time of writing Dave was preparing for the East to West Traverse classic. For the last three years SSAANZ has taken 12 people on a 9-day tramp across the Southern Alps. It’s challenging, but like all the events that SSAANZ runs, it aims to improve the wellbeing of the participants.



SSAANZ has crossed the South Alps four times. This was the third group to complete the Southern Traverse.


Dave doesn't claim to be a health practitioner. “None of us are in or from the health sector. We have our health and safety plans, but our events encourage a healthy way to live. We have found a system which works for us and others.”

In the coming months, SSAANZ is doing everything and going everywhere. They are planning a ‘Round the mountain’ (Ruapehu) tramp, a charter fishing boat off Kaikōura, sea kayaking, an east to west 4-day tramp across the Ruahine Range, and are working with the Gore RSA to run 3 events for Southland vets.

“It’s great and important to work with the RSA and all the other veterans organisations. We can achieve so much more.”

Dave Benfell has found a great formula. “We’ve seen some amazing results. Veterans having fun together, and coming away reinvigorated.”

For more information:

- Visit the SSAANZ website (<https://www.ssaanz.co.nz>) 
 - Email SSAANZ at info@ssaanz.co.nz (<mailto:info@ssaanz.co.nz>)
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(<https://www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz/assets/VA-News/VA-News-2022-Edition-1-Autumn.pdf>)

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