

New Zealand Search and Rescue Council

NEW ZEALAND  
**SEARCH**  
AND  
**RESCUE**

Rapu Whakarauroa Aotearoa



# 2023 Awards



*The New Zealand Search and Rescue Council and Secretariat  
warmly congratulate our 2023 Award winners.*

*Whakataka te hau ki te uru,  
Whakataka tō hau ki te tonga.*

*Kia makinakina ki uta,  
Kia mataratara ki tai.*

*E hi ake ana te ata kura  
he tio, he huka, he hauhunga.*

*Haumi e! Hui e! Taiki e!*

*The wind swings to the west  
then turns to the south, settles down.*

*Making it prickly cold inland  
Making it piercingly cold at sea.*

*The glowing morning will rise  
on ice, on snow, on frost.*

*Join! Gather! Intertwine!*



# Gold Award

## OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

*He iti hoki te mokoroa, nāna I kakati te kahikatea.*

*While the mokoroa grub is small, it cuts through the white pine.*

The NZ Search and Rescue Gold Award (Operational) honours the people, groups or organisations who have performed at the very highest level during a search and rescue operation in 2023. The recipients of the Gold Award have made a very significant contribution, going above and beyond their normal duties.



### Hawke's Bay Surf Life Saving NZ SAR Squad

**For the rescue of over 200 people from Esk Valley and Pakowhai during Cyclone Gabrielle on 14 February 2023.**

In early February 2023, Cyclone Gabrielle brought unprecedented rainfall to the North Island. Widespread flooding and landslides claimed 11 lives and destroyed homes, businesses, and infrastructure.



At 5am on 14 February, the Hawke's Bay SLSNZ SAR Squad were called to assist with multiple requests for help in the Esk Valley, where rapidly rising floodwaters had stranded many people in their homes and on their rooftops.

Following a rapid risk assessment, and with help from locals and emergency services, the squad deployed to the area via Hill Road which was one of the few viable routes available.

Shortly after 8am, they launched their Inflatable Rescue Boats into the swift current and began rescuing people from the floodwaters. Conditions on the water were unlike anything the squad had experienced before. Each team had to operate in strong currents, navigating a maze of buildings, trees, fences, and debris. The squad conducted rescue operations in the Esk Valley for nearly five hours.



In the early afternoon, the squad were redeployed to Pakowhai with other Surf Life Saving NZ personnel. The Ngaruroro River had burst its banks, flooding houses along Pakowhai Road and Gilligan Road and rendering the area near unrecognisable. Seven inflatable rescue boats were deployed and the teams worked into the evening rescuing stranded people.

Over the course of the day, the squad rescued over 200 people from the flooded areas. Being locals, many of the squad members had their homes and livelihoods personally impacted by the cyclone. They dropped everything to rescue others in need, clearly going above and beyond for their community.

**The NZSAR Council acknowledges the severe and ongoing impact Cyclone Gabrielle has had on the affected communities. The Council extends its deepest gratitude to all the agencies, organisations and individuals who were involved in search and rescue operations during the cyclone.**



# Gold Award

## SUPPORT ACTIVITY

*He kotuku rerenga tahi.*

*A white heron flies once.*

The NZ Search and Rescue Gold Award (Support) honours the individual who has made a very significant contribution through their work over a sustained period. The recipient of the Gold Award (Support) has performed outstanding work that has had a marked impact on the search and rescue sector.

### Senior Constable Conrad Smith

**For his service and commitment to search and rescue and the Ruapehu Emergency Services Charitable Trust.**

Senior Constable Conrad Smith has been an active member of New Zealand's search and rescue community for 18 years, from field team member to incident controller and chairperson of the Ruapehu Emergency Services Charitable Trust.

He has managed numerous high-profile search and rescue operations in the Central North Island, including the Mangetepopo canyoning tragedy and the Te Maari eruption that destroyed Ketetahi Hut. Conrad has also volunteered for the Ruapehu Alpine Rescue Organisation (RARO) for over 15 years, often turning up for jobs on his days off from Police. He is frequently approached by newer team members who need a listening ear or some sage advice.

Five years ago, Conrad identified the need to future-proof the Central North Island's search and rescue capability. Together with a small team, he has dedicated countless hours to establishing the Central Plateau Emergency Management Facility, which provides a modern incident control point, training space, equipment store, and staging area for local operations. Thirteen different organisations and local iwi were consulted in the process and nearly \$1.2 million raised. The facility will be officially opened in mid-2024.



The building sits on land made available by local iwi Uenuku, and is the combined home of the Ruapehu Alpine Rescue Organisation, Ruapehu Land Search and Rescue and Ruapehu Civil Defence. It also acts as an operations base for the Whanganui Police SAR Squad, enabling faster, more effective responses to emergencies for Ruapehu communities and visitors.

Conrad is a humble and inspirational leader, who is considered a role model for how to build and maintain relationships across the search and rescue sector.



# Certificate of Achievement

## OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

**Northland Land Search and Rescue**

**Northland Police SAR Squad**

**Fire and Emergency New Zealand Ti Hiku Specialist  
Water Rescue Team**

**Fire and Emergency New Zealand Urban Search and  
Rescue Team**

**Fire and Emergency New Zealand Whangārei Fire  
Station and support staff**

**Northland Plumbing and Gas**

**For the search for a missing teenager in Abbey Caves on 9 May 2023.**

On 9 May 2023, Police were notified of a school group in difficulty in Abbey Caves, Whangārei. While 15 members of the group made it out of the cave, one student was unaccounted for.

The large team of responders began a technical and challenging search near the cave entrance, where the student was last seen.

The weather conditions on the day were poor and continuing to deteriorate. Heavy rain followed by severe thunderstorms lashed the cave entrance, making search conditions very difficult. The responders worked tirelessly and steadily in their search, conducting frequent briefings and risk assessments as water levels continued to rise.

Staff members from Northland Plumbing and Gas operated a fibre optic camera to investigate areas under water that couldn't be searched by any other method.

At dusk, lighting was set up to enable the team to keep searching. Later that evening, the rain eased off and the water levels dropped. The missing student was located shortly afterwards but was sadly deceased. After a lengthy and technical rope recovery operation, the student was able to be returned to his whānau.





High water levels in the vicinity of Abbey Caves

# OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

## **Wakatipu Land Search and Rescue – Alpine Cliff Rescue**

### **For the rescue of two climbers from The Remarkables between 1-2 July 2023.**

Around 5pm on 1 July 2023, the Wakatipu Land Search and Rescue – Alpine Cliff Rescue team received a call from Police regarding two climbers stranded near Single Cone. The climbers had only planned for a day trip and were caught out by a rapid change in weather. With increasing avalanche hazard, the climbers chose to seek what shelter they could find in the steep alpine terrain and call for assistance.

Four members of the Alpine Cliff Rescue team flew to the scene via helicopter, but failing light and 80 to 100-kilometre per hour winds prevented them from reaching the climbers. Conditions that night were severe, with heavy snow falling, wind chill down to -15 degrees, and the avalanche danger rating at 'high'.

After a robust discussion and detailed risk assessment, the Alpine Cliff Rescue team departed the Remarkables ski area at 10:30pm to attempt a rescue on foot. As they climbed, the team frequently re-assessed snow stability and other hazards to ensure their route was suitable. Four hours later, they reached the stranded climbers who were cold but unharmed. The climbers were escorted to safety by the rescue team, arriving back at the ski area around 7.30am.



# OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

## **Rakaia Land Search and Rescue**

## **South Canterbury Land Search and Rescue**

## **Murray Bowden and Buck**

### **For the rescue of a missing trumper from Little Mount Peel / Huatekerekere between 26-27 December 2023.**

Around 10pm on 26 December 2023, Police were informed that a solo trumper had become lost in Peel Forest. Weather conditions were very poor, with a strong southerly front bringing persistent rain and low cloud.

Two field teams, each with search dogs, were tasked to search the two main tracks that lead to Little Mount Peel / Huatekerekere. A third team was tasked to bring additional equipment, food and warm clothing to the summit shelter.

The field teams searched throughout the night before reconvening at the summit shelter around 5am. The plan was for a break with some hot food and drink at the hut, then continue searching west along the main ridge. Not long after arriving, Murray Bowden heard a noise that he thought was a voice. Without finishing his drink, he was back out into the storm with his team and his search dog Buck.

Using a combination of Buck's tracking, sound line searching and terrain assessment, the missing trumper was located a considerable distance off the main ridge. He was assisted to the summit hut, where a doctor from a field team treated his minor injuries and mild hypothermia. The weather prevented a helicopter extraction so later that morning, field teams assisted the trumper off the mountain.



# OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

## **The crew of the *Amaltal Apollo***

## **The crew of the *Moana Chief***

## **No. 40 Squadron Royal New Zealand Air Force**

### **For the rescue of a solo sailor 50 nautical miles from Cape Kidnappers / Te Kauwae-a-Māui between 29-30 March 2023.**

Around 5pm on 29 March 2023, a solo sailor on board the 10-metre yacht *Astra* was swept overboard when the yacht rolled. The sailor managed to swim back to the yacht and activate his distress beacon.

The sea conditions in the area were severe, with 60-knot southerly winds and 7-metre swells. A helicopter rescue was impossible in those weather conditions, so the Rescue Coordination Centre New Zealand began looking for nearby vessels of opportunity to assist.

Two vessels, the 42-metre *Amaltal Apollo* and 175-metre *Moana Chief*, arrived on scene the following morning, but poor visibility meant they lost sight of the yacht. A C-130 Hercules aircraft from No. 40 Squadron arrived on scene around 9am and the aircrew were able to re-locate the yacht.

The much-larger *Moana Chief* positioned upwind of the yacht to provide some shelter during the rescue effort, while the C-130 Hercules aircrew provided oversight and communications.

The crew of *Amaltal Apollo* used a line thrower rocket to send a line over the yacht. The sailor entered the water and used the line to drag himself into a life ring which had been attached to the line. The crew of *Amaltal Apollo* hauled the sailor to the side of their vessel. Waiting for the right moment in the large swells, they were able to pluck him from the ocean to safety.



# OPERATIONAL ACTIVITY

## Northland Rescue Helicopters

### For the rescue of a sailor 100 nautical miles from Kerikeri on 12 May 2023.

On the afternoon of 12 May 2023, the skipper of the 18-metre launch *PATRIOT X* notified authorities that one of the four crew had developed a medical condition, and they were returning to port. The vessel was on a voyage to Fiji, and at the time was more than 150 nautical miles north-east of Kerikeri.

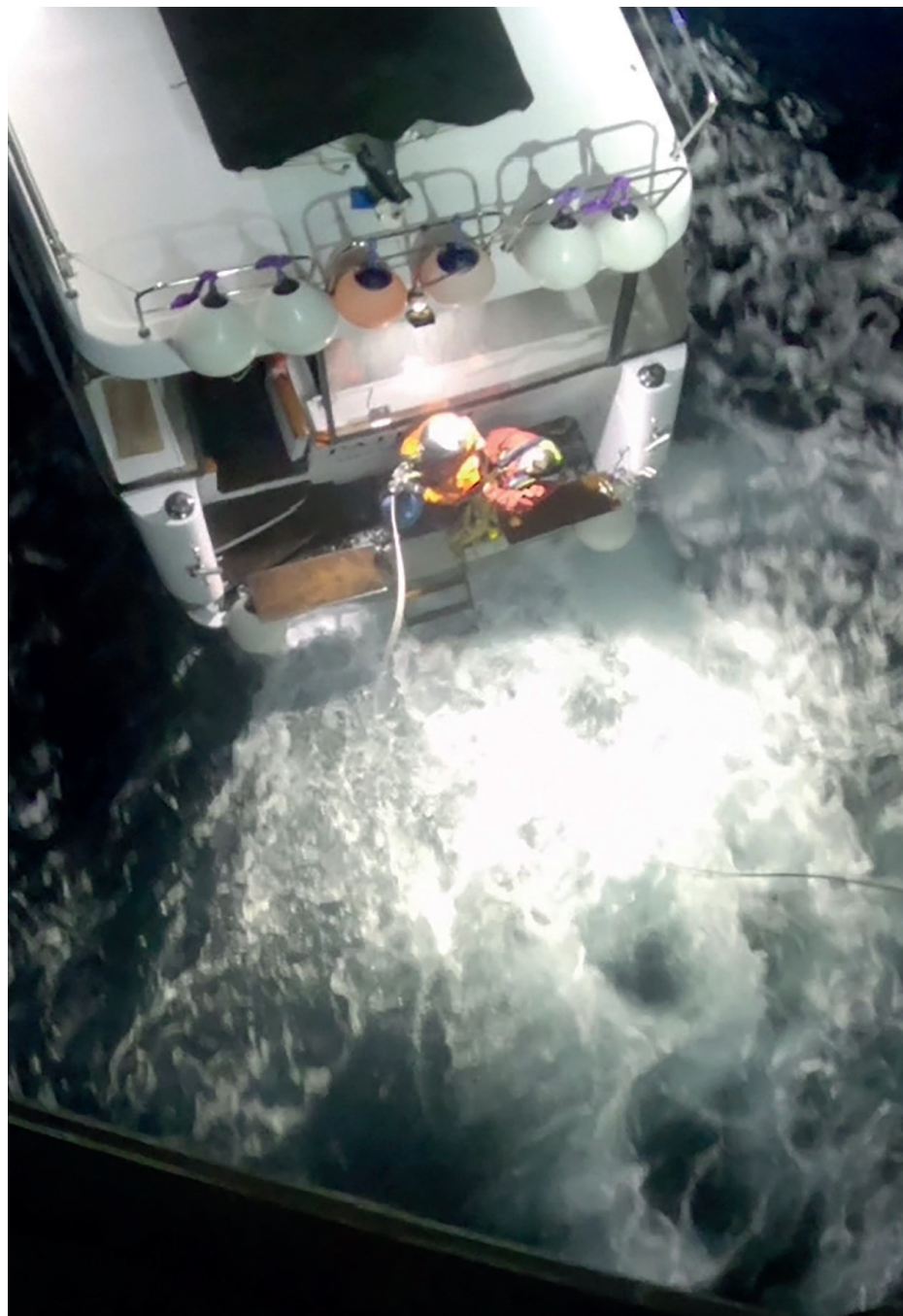
At 5:30pm the skipper reported that the man's condition had deteriorated, and sought medical advice. It was recommended that the man be evacuated to hospital urgently, and the Northland Rescue Helicopters crew from Whangārei were tasked to respond.

While the helicopter was en route, the yacht's skipper performed a surgical procedure on the sailor, under the instructions of a doctor via a Starlink connection.

At 11.40 pm, 100 nautical miles off the coast, the Whangārei helicopter crew winched the sailor off the launch in three-metre seas and 20-knot winds, before he was flown to Whangārei Base Hospital for medical treatment.

This operation was conducted near the edge of the helicopter's operating range, giving the crew less than 30 minutes to successfully complete a challenging winch rescue. The operation's success was the result of the crew's skill, experience and teamwork.







# Certificate of Achievement

## SUPPORT ACTIVITY



### Martin Balch

For his service and commitment to search and rescue in Otago.

Martin Balch has been involved in search and rescue for nearly 50 years. His service spans numerous organisations including Dunedin Marine SAR, Coastguard Boating Education, Amateur Radio Emergency Communications, Canterbury Mountain Radio, and the Otago Maritime VHF Association.

Martin is highly regarded for his commitment to building relationships between different organisations across the Otago region.

His operational contributions have been outstanding. Martin's knowledge of the weather, tides and conditions in the area are highly regarded and he has used his experience to assist many SAR operations. He is the marine SAR advisor to the Dunedin Police, who highly value his advice and contributions.

Martin has filled the roles of training officer, secretary, treasurer, and chairperson for Dunedin Marine SAR, as well as trustee and treasurer for Dunedin Amateur Radio Emergency Communications.

Through his service to the radio communication organisations, he has given countless hours to land-based and maritime SAR operations, as well as to developing and maintaining vital radio infrastructure.

He is a personable and highly skilled individual, who is considered a true team player.



## Graeme Irvine

**For his service and commitment to search and rescue in Otago.**

Graeme has contributed to search and rescue on land and water for over 50 years. He is highly respected for his local knowledge, and operational experience.

His involvement with Dunedin Marine SAR began in 1973. As equipment officer and safety officer, Graeme worked closely with the local rescue helicopters and used his professional engineering background to acquire new technical rescue equipment, such as scoop nets, slings, and rescue harnesses. He personally tested and maintained the equipment for many years.

Graeme joined Dunedin Land Search and Rescue in 1986. A 4WD enthusiast, he set up systems to train members of his 4WD club to assist with search and rescue operations. Graeme's foresight paid dividends, with many of the drivers becoming fully qualified Land Search and Rescue field team members.

In recent years, he has turned his focus to incident management teams, where his experience, inquisitive nature and eye for detail have been invaluable. He is talented with operational systems, and can often be found designing exercises, creating operational plans, and running training activities. Alongside others, he founded the Tautuku Cup competition for Land Search and Rescue.

Graeme is a dedicated and highly regarded individual, with a lifetime of service to search and rescue.

## SUPPORT ACTIVITY



### **Rob Carpenter**

**For his service and commitment to search and rescue and Coastguard Marlborough.**

Rob Carpenter has spent most of his life on and around the sea. He pursued a career in ship, yacht and boat building and sailed extensively in his spare time. Rob joined Coastguard Marlborough in 2015 and quietly began an incredible transformation of the unit.

Rob took on leadership roles and became unit president in 2021, with a leadership style founded on relationships and community engagement.

Rob empowers his members to speak up and take ownership. He is a champion of diversity, actively seeking out opportunities to encourage more women and young people to join the unit. Despite only having around 30 volunteers, the unit can easily deploy all-female operational crews.

Under Rob's leadership, the unit has raised its profile within the local community. The crew are now familiar faces at local schools, boat clubs and charity events, sharing boating safety messages.

Rob's reputation for building relationships extends outside of Marlborough, with Rob regularly assisting other South Island Coastguard units with training. Rob's service also extends onshore, as a Land Search and Rescue volunteer for the last five years.

Rob's colleagues within Coastguard describe him as a truly transformational leader, who is dedicated to serving others.



## **Jonathan Walmisley MBE**

**For his service and commitment to search and rescue and Coastguard Wānaka Lakes.**

Jonathan Walmisley joined Coastguard Wānaka Lakes in 2012 before becoming president in 2014. Under his leadership, the unit has developed into a sustainable and highly functioning team based in their own purpose-built Marine Rescue Centre.

Jonathan leads by example and is often first to volunteer. His inclusive leadership style has had a long-term positive impact on both day-to-day operations and unit culture.

Jonathan actively seeks feedback from his unit members and has made changes to ensure volunteer workloads are manageable. He has led the establishment of several small teams to take responsibility for a range of tasks and equipped them with well-documented processes to follow.

His experience as a Coordinated Incident Management System instructor helped him identify the need for a shore-based incident management team. Jonathan created a local team framework and training pathway for unit members, and now the team is a highly valuable contributor to the unit's capabilities.

Jonathan spent over five years leading the establishment of a dedicated Marine Rescue Centre in Wānaka. He identified volunteers with key skills and together they fundraised over \$1 million, with the centre opening in November 2022.

Jonathan is highly regarded by his SAR colleagues and local community for his integrity, commitment, and leadership.

## SUPPORT ACTIVITY



### **Phil Harman**

**For his service and commitment to search and rescue and Surf Life Saving in Hawke's Bay.**

Phil Harman joined the Waimārama Surf Life Saving Club in 1982. He has been involved in the Surf Life Saving Hawke's Bay SAR Squad for more than 20 years, as a highly valued team member and leader.

He has taken part in numerous search and rescue operations, reuniting missing people with their whānau and friends.

During his tenure as squad coordinator from 2008 to 2018, Phil developed a team of highly skilled surf lifeguards and oversaw many search and rescue operations. He simultaneously held positions as regional examiner, national committee member and patrol auditor.

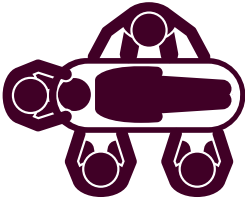
Phil diligently planned for a smooth transition when he stepped down as coordinator of the Hawke's Bay SAR Squad. He supported the new leader in a co-coordinator arrangement for a year, before handing over the reins entirely. Phil has remained a senior operational member of the squad, guiding and supporting the next generation of squad members.

Phil has contributed significant time and energy to ensuring his team members are well prepared for any situation they may encounter during operations and exercises.

His knowledge and experience in the marine search and rescue space is highly regarded by his team members, the wider Surf Life Saving community and the search and rescue sector.

# 2023 SAR Snapshot

For the year ending 31 December 2023



**3,514**

SAR incidents



**161**

Lives saved



**814**

People rescued



**1,126**

People assisted



**62,979**

Operational people hours



**2,672**

Operational asset hours



# NEW ZEALAND SEARCH AND RESCUE REGION

**Do you know an organisation, group or individual who you think should be acknowledged for their contribution to search and rescue?**

There are two categories – operational activity and support activity. More information about each category, the NZSAR Awards and the nomination process can be found at [nzsar.govt.nz/awards](https://nzsar.govt.nz/awards).

The 2024 Award nominations close on 31 January 2025.