

# 1938 BLACK SUNDAY IN THE SURF

It was the greatest mass surf rescue ever performed in Australia, if not in the world. Yet, in the history of surf lifesaving, 6 February 1938 is remembered as Black Sunday — because although 180 people were snatched from an almost certain death, five others were drowned.

It meant that for the first time in its thirty-two-year history, the Bondi Surf Life Saving Club's record of events did not include what had become a routine note:

'No lives lost while patrols were on duty'. For, among the fit and bronzed young volunteers who so diligently patrol the country's beaches throughout the long hot summers, only total success is considered good enough.

The Bondi Surf Bather's Life Saving Club (as it was originally known) was founded in 1906, the first of its kind in the world. A Life Saving Society,

which used methods developed abroad for use in still water, had been functioning with a few scattered volunteers in Sydney since about 1894, but very few people were then using the beaches for what some of the Victorian generation considered to be a somewhat indecent activity — bathing in public.

In fact, until the Manly Town Council lifted its ban in 1903, public bathing had been forbidden by law on Sydney beaches during daylight hours. But soon, Manly was packed each weekend, forcing other local councils to lift their by-laws as well.

As bathing became more popular, so did the danger of drownings, particularly among the many inexperienced swimmers discovering the surf for the first time.

Early rescue equipment consisted of a pole planted on the beach with a coil of rope and a ship's lifejacket, but this proved cumbersome and unreliable, particularly when people got into difficulties beyond the range of the rope.

So, after experimenting with hairpins and a cotton reel, Lyster Ormsby, captain of the Bondi Club, and fellow members, designed the lifesaving reel which is today in use all over the world.

Within just over a week of first demonstrating the novel piece of equipment on 23 December 1906, the Bondi lifesavers had a chance to prove its worth by rescuing two young boys. One of them was Charles Kingsford Smith, who was later to become Australia's most famous aviator.

Later that year, the various clubs formed the Surf Bathers' Association of

New South Wales, which did much to force councils to change beach regulations which required men and women to wear *skirts* over their already cumbersome neck-to-knee swimsuits.

The first World War saw most club members enlisting, and brought lifesaving to a virtual standstill. By the early 1920s, however, there were almost sixty clubs operating in New South Wales and Queensland, while others were being formed in Tasmania and Western Australia.

This led to the creation of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia, which by 1930 had clubs in action at eighty-one beaches around Australia.

By now surf bathing had become one of the country's most popular forms of recreation — so popular, indeed, that on Black Sunday an estimated 35 000 people were crowded on to Bondi Beach when a series of huge freak waves swept about 200 bathers from a sand-bank and dragged them out to sea.

Carl Jeppers, the Bondi captain who led the more than seventy lifesavers in their heroic task, later described conditions in the surf as:

*...just hell, [with] men, women and children fighting for their lives. It was mass hysteria at its worst. In frenzy they shouted, screamed, cried, begged and prayed.*

*They grabbed, clawed and fought while some calmer surfers tried to reassure and help them .... in another instant... lifesavers... were on their way in a greater race — against time and death.*

*They manned the available surf reels, seven in all, grabbed up any rub-*

*ber surf float, surf board or ski in sight or swam strongly towards the turmoil with only their surfing skill to help them.*

One of the five who drowned was one of the rescuers, Carl Saur, who gave his life to save a girl whom he held up by the hair until he sank and was drowned. The girl was saved by others.

For the courage of its members that day the Bondi Club received a special award from the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia.

The second World War saw Diggers introducing surf lifesaving to various countries abroad, and it is estimated that about 150 million bathers around the world are protected each year by this Australian-inspired service.

More than 230 clubs are now operating in Australia with about 15 000 active members, men and women, who use the most sophisticated equipment available, including power jet boats that skim at great speed across shallow water.

Most clubs have access to helicopters and, in some centres, regular aerial patrols of beaches have become commonplace.

But, in the end, success depends on the dedication of the volunteer lifesavers who, again this year, will deny the sea about 5000 victims.