



SLSA History Fact Sheet #3

Surf lifesavers at war

Australian surf lifesavers have a long tradition of enlisting to fight for the country in wars. Leone Huntsman and Nancy Cushing write that the enlistment of many club members into the armed forces during the First World War heightened the status of the surf lifesaver as an Australian icon. At the time, the media was impressed by the dedication of members of such young clubs.

The proportion of surf lifesavers who enlisted in both World Wars was impressive. 110 members of Bondi SBLSC served overseas in WWI, and 210 in WWII. From the west coast, almost all members of Cottesloe SLSC eventually enlisted in WWI, and 158 served in WWII. In the Second World War, it was reported that at least 90% of Palm Beach's (NSW) members, 98% of North Steyne's (a total of 104 members), and, amazingly, 100% of Byron Bay's members joined up.

Unfortunately some clubs also suffered heavy casualties. The Honour Boards in Club rooms around the country commemorate those who lost their lives in these wars. Cottesloe lost 10 members in WWI and 24 in WWII; Bondi lost 10 in WWI and 14 in WWII. Maroubra lost 16 in WWI, and 9 of the 145 who enlisted in WWII. 6 of the 37 Collaroy members who enlisted in WWI were killed in action, as were 9 members of North Steyne. The list of casualties is endless.

The loss of so many surf lifesavers – not only from beach patrols but also from club and Association administrative roles – made it increasingly difficult to continue the day to day running of surf lifesaving. Between 1915 and 1917, no minutes were recorded, nor were any annual reports produced, and the Association's affairs were left in the hands of the Executive. During this time, it was stated that 'there was practically no work for the Association to do,' beyond examinations. In the First World War, only one Association carnival was held, in 1915, and the proceeds were donated to the Belgian Relief Fund. Australian Championships were suspended during WWII.



American soldiers are trained in methods of Australian surf lifesaving, Kirra, 1943

SLSAA's administration was further hampered during the Second World War by the enlistment of SLSAA President, Adrian Curlewis. After being captured by Japanese

forces and imprisoned in Changi in 1942, Curlewis stood aside from his role as President, to be replaced in the interim by Roy Doyle. Curlewis resumed the leadership of the Association upon his return to Australia in 1945. Curlewis spent over three years in Changi Prison, and the diary he kept was later used as evidence in a number of war crimes tribunals. He also kept track of all Australian surf lifesavers who were imprisoned alongside him, and later recalled that in Changi, 'discussion – even arguments – took place about surf rescues, surf carnivals and origins of clubs.'

The presence of surf lifesavers in the Australian armed forces not only diminished their presence on Australian beaches, but made surf lifesaving on overseas beaches part of the WWII experience for many. Surf lifesavers patrolled beaches in war zones, set up new clubs in places like Torokina Beach in the Solomon Islands, Jaffa, Syria, and Papua New Guinea and participated in carnivals and surf lifesaving displays in Palestine, Borneo and Cornwall. World War II also saw the training of hundreds of American soldiers in Australian surf lifesaving methods on Queensland's beaches.



LAC Nuble and LAC Crick, Solomon Islands SLSC, Torokina, Bougainville

Sources

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