



WAVERLEY COUNCIL

# BLACK SUNDAY



A Waverley Library  
Local History Fact Sheet

Sunday, 6 February 1938, appeared a typical summer's day on Bondi Beach. A crowd of 35,000 enjoyed the hot weather, sand, and surf, with waves breaking evenly about 100 feet offshore. The bathing area flags were positioned almost directly opposite the Bondi Pavilion about 80 yards apart.

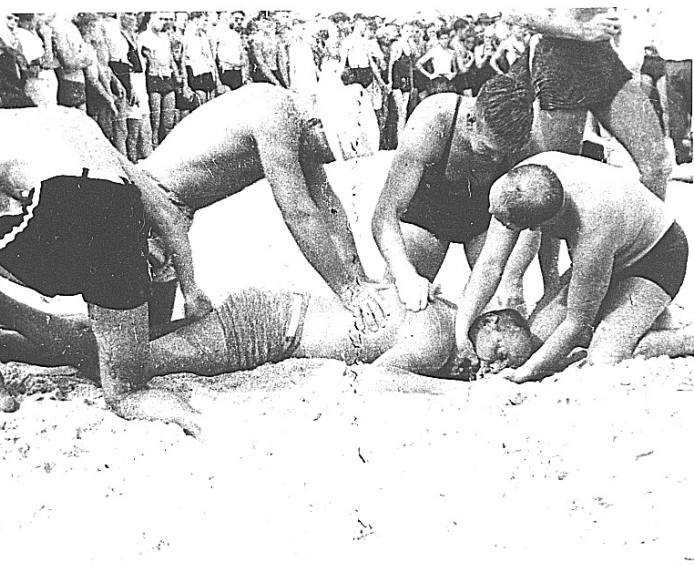
When a lull in the wave cycle did eventuate, the massive backwash was phenomenal. Swimmers were swept into a deep channel and out to sea.

There was instant panic. Men, women and children fighting for their lives. In an official report to Waverley Council on 8 February, Chief Beach Inspector Tom Meagher recounted:

A large sandbank meant that many swimmers had ventured out much further from the shore than usual, but the sandbank meant they were still only in waist-deep water. At about 3.00 p.m. two duty patrols were changing shifts at the Bondi surf club and some 60 club members were mingling around waiting for the competition. Suddenly, three tremendous waves rolled onto the beach in such quick succession that the water could not recede.

*'Fortunately none of them were more than about 70 or 80 yards from the shore, but to get about 250 people clawing and grabbing in indescribable panic, out of the surf was...one that had not previously been attempted.'*

On the beach there was a stunned but short-lived silence. Lifesavers leapt into action, manning the seven reels already on the beach, and





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Images from top:

Mass rescues at Bondi Beach, picture from Labor Daily, 7 February, 1938.

Front page of the Daily Telegraph, Monday 7 February, 1938.

Lifeguards resuscitating bathers on Black Sunday, picture from Labor Daily, 7 February, 1938.

Black Sunday at Bondi Beach, picture from Labor Daily, 7 February, 1938.

grabbing rubber surf floats, surf boards and skis, or swimming into the turmoil without belts and only their surfing skill to help them.

Panic also swept those relatives and friends on the beach. The hastily summoned local police could not cope and called for reinforcements, doctors and ambulances.

The surf clubhouse began to resemble a hospital emergency ward as the rescued were brought in. About 30 were resuscitated on the beach while others were rushed to hospital. A visiting American doctor, Marshall W. Dyer, said, "I have never seen and I never expect to see again, such magnificent work as was done by those lifesavers."

After some 30 long agonising minutes the water was cleared. Approximately 250 bathers required assistance; 150 were rescued unharmed; 60 were suffering from immersion; 35 were rescued unconscious and

successfully revived; and five people were dead;

- Bernard F. Byrne
- Ronald D. McGregor
- Charles L. Sauer (known as Sweet)
- Michael Kennedy (known as Taylor)
- Leslie R. Potter.

This extraordinary day on Bondi Beach became known colloquially as 'Black Sunday'.

The number of rescues and drownings were so high it is still the largest mass surf rescue in Australian history.

In the words of the Coroner, Mr Oram, "Their [lifeguards] work is voluntary and it is wonderful work they do."