

Bronte's First Surf Carnival, 1931



Bronte SLSC, c. 1910

'If the main purpose of surf carnivals is to test and demonstrate the mettle of Australian lifesavers, then surely the Bronte Club's first-ever carnival succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its promoters.' Ray Slattery, *Grab the Belt*

On Saturday, 7 February 1931 the Bronte Surf Life Saving Club was honoured to be holding its first open surf carnival. The high note was to be the laying of the foundation stone for the new clubhouse by the Mayor, David Hunter. But what began as a proud day for the Club, soon ended in near tragedy.

The surf was extremely rough that day, with a strong current running alongside the rocks at the southern end of the beach. Some described the sea that day as the biggest in memory, others described the waves as 'mountainous'.

The first event on the calendar was the Junior Surf Race, with 30 young competitors, all under 18 years. Ivo Wyatt of North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club rounded the buoys and came in on a tremendous wave to win the race, but behind him things were deteriorating rapidly.

The situation soon turned dangerous. The watching crowd stood aghast watching as the other young swimmers were caught in a powerful rip. Some swimmers clung to buoys put in place to mark the race route; others were swept out to sea and around the back of the Bronte Baths.

With so many swimmers in trouble there was concern about getting to them all in time.

A surf boat from North Steyne Surf Life Saving Club was first out through the crashing seas, picking up six men, others soon followed. An experienced life saver on the North Steyne boat rated the Bronte experience the worst he had known in his long career.

The North Bondi surf boat was swept on to the rocks, but Dee Why and Queenscliff boats negotiated the heavy sea to pick up distressed swimmers. Because of the extreme conditions some of the surf boats were unable to return to shore after rescuing the swimmers and were forced to row to Bondi to land.

The Sun newspaper reported:

'In a flash the massed manpower on the beach was thrusting through the crashing surf to rescue them. Surfboats, belt swimmers, and plucky young lifesavers depending on nothing but their own sheer strength against waves that curled high overhead and came down with a sound like thunder risked their own lives to assist.'

Thousands of spectators watched the rescues from the beach and cliffs, with many people crying and others cheering for the beltmen and boat crews.

Despite the appalling conditions a mass rescue was successfully undertaken and all the competitors were saved. There were many heroic efforts that day by individuals, teams and crews and the day is remembered as a milestone in Bronte Surf Life Saving Club's history.

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