



IT'S ALMOST SUMMER ...EXCEPT FOR THE LIFESAVERS.

Brett Beswick - Support Services Manager and Club Captain at Avoca Beach

Remember Billy Thorpe and “*It’s almost summer*”? With the sublime weather this August you could be excused for thinking that far from it being ‘*almost summer*’ it was in fact the real thing (acknowledgement to Russell Morris). Except for the lifesavers.

When we hit the beach each summer, we do so, probably without thinking about it, in the knowledge that we’re under the watchful eyes of the men and women in yellow and red. Come the long weekend in October, the surf lifesaving volunteer teams will muster at the beachheads, their mission to protect swimmers, surfers and sun worshippers.

One of those is Brett Beswick, Support Services Manager and Club Captain at Avoca Beach. A lifesaver of 30 years, Brett loves the beach and the lifesaving movement, something he has been involved with since he was a Nipper.

“Surf lifesaving is a great way to volunteer. Plenty of fresh air, lots of sunshine, camaraderie and a real sense of community,” Brett said. It has had its challenges with membership numbers, but Brett cites programs like ‘Bondi Rescue’ and ‘Surf Patrol’ and the 2007 centenary designation as the ‘Year of the Lifesaver’ as contributing to a resurgence in interest in the surf lifesaving movement.

In addition, he pointed out that the new breed of modern surf clubs, springing up on the sites of their former headquarters, were taking



advantage of their prime positions to meet the needs and changing tastes of beachgoers.

“Many surf clubs today are quite different to the clubs of old. They have always been important community anchors, but many of them were in need of updating. “Thanks to government funding and corporate and community support, the new clubs are architecturally and aesthetically superior to the old ones. Clubs have employed sustainable building practices, and through leasing out part of these redeveloped premises for restaurants, bars, cafes and function centres, have developed income streams that provide a higher degree of financial self-sufficiency.

“The café at Avoca Beach Surf Club, for example, is probably the best

location to have a coffee anywhere. Up and down the coast, surf clubs are developing a new range of services and, by extension, additional opportunities for funding sustainability.

“This in turn means that we can buy better equipment, upgrade equipment more regularly, provide opportunities for members to be upskilled in all facets of our operations and training, keep abreast of OH&S obligations and focus on what we do best - lifesaving,” Brett advised.

So the question I have always wanted to pose now has its chance of being revived. Is being a volunteer lifesaver dangerous?

Brett casually confides that he broke his back last year after he came off a Rescue Water Craft (RWC), though

adds quickly that it's fine now. (I am left wondering whether or not that this shouldn't be a new definition of the surf lifesaving 'iron man'.)

"That sort of thing is rare. When people join up they can do so in the knowledge that our members are the best trained lifesavers in the world. Go to beaches in Japan, the Caribbean, the Channel Islands, France, the US and you'll be surprised by how many Australian lifesavers are working there. So, from the client service perspective, Aussie swimmers are the best protected in the world," Brett said.

"However, when the surf is up, there is a rip running, and an arm goes straight up, that is not the time to consider whether volunteering at the school canteen might have been a better volunteering option. Again, the training is what stands us all in good stead," Brett advised.

"But again, those occasions are few and far between - making sure swimmers keep between the flags, dealing with bluebottle stings, straying surfboards and lost children are what is usually involved," Brett said.

However, that is just the tip of the sandcastle as far as Brett's involvement is concerned. Like many volunteers, his volunteering hours and commitments resemble those of a full-time job and his volunteering

role extends well beyond the shore and break.

The backbreaking RWC culprit is one of the fifteen RWCs on the Central Coast and he is just one of the 50 operators who man them. He is also the volunteer RWC coordinator.

The RWC teams patrol the beaches of the Central Coast. They are involved in rescues, patrols and work closely with other emergency services.

When time is of the essence and lives are at risk, speed and efficient communication are paramount.

VolunteerTeam's software has been instrumental in Brett being able to organise and coordinate his teams, patrols and rosters. His ability to post bulletins and SMS his colleagues has made life much easier.

The print-out of messages is testament to the scope and efficiency of the system, something he wished he had in his role as part of the Tsunami Early Warning Response Team.

Tsunami Early Warning Response Team? Surely not.

"Absolutely. The 15 regionally based managers are part of the emergency response network. When the July earthquake hit just off the coast of the south island of New Zealand in July, though there was no emergency, they were and remain,

integral to the alert regime that is now in place nationally," he said.

A link in the national response regime? Surely not.

Sensing my lingering doubt, Brett displayed his mobile phone message log - from 6.18pm through to just after 1:00 am there were the messages, the tsunami broadcasts spelling out the - luckily - decreasing threat of a tsunami hitting local coastal communities.

Surely was.

Well, my childhood lifesavers, with their march-pasts, old surf reels and the ignored advice not to rub sand into my blue bottle stings would not likely recognise the professional, sun-smart, dedicated and highly-skilled lifesavers of today. Nor would they recognise the gender of many of the patrol teams, or the club houses. And Billy Thorpe probably wouldn't recognise winter.

However, one thing hasn't changed - the surf lifesaving team members who patrol the surf, the beaches and, in Brett's case, form part of the tsunami emergency response network, are all *still* volunteers.

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