



115 years of the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club

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On this day 115 years ago, the Bondi Surf Bathers' Life Saving Club was established, arguably making it the first organisation of its kind in the world.

The 23 blokes who selflessly came together to set up an association that would rescue distressed swimmers on February 21, 1907 was a defining moment in our national story.

We have been a nation of volunteers since our founding.

Each of us coming together to do our bit for the wider community defines who we are as a people.

This spirit literally goes back to the early days.

The settlers and convicts from Britain knew they had to survive in the harsh Australian outback that was radically different from the green pastures of England and the Scottish highlands.



As part of their efforts to adapt and live, they developed a culture of mateship which meant that everyone did their bit to look after the rest without expecting to be compensated for it.

It would be no exaggeration to say that we wouldn't be here as a nation, if it wasn't for those prepared to serve the community for the greater good, without expecting to be paid a cent in return.

Think of how many lives volunteer firefighters have saved during bushfires. We've even had a Prime Minister in Tony Abbott who was, and still is, a fire.

Think of the number of lives rescued from drowning by lifeguards at our beaches.

Think of those mums and dads of cricketers and footy players who contribute afternoon tea – sandwiches, sausage rolls and meat pies at thousands of sporting clubs across the nation.

Think of those social workers who serve in retirement villages and other aged care facilities. The list is endless.

Yet what is intriguing is the lack of public acknowledgement let alone appreciation for this integral part of the Australian way of life.

And perhaps that itself is attributable to that other uniquely Australian characteristic which would require another article in itself – modesty.

Let's face it, we're too modest to boast about our own innate goodness, and that often works to our detriment.

In an age where certain sections of the elite constantly remind us how racist and sexist we are as a nation, the need for us to start balancing out this criticism with a celebration of our positive cultural traits has never been greater.

And what better occasion to do it than on February 21 to mark the formation of the iconic Bondi surf club.

The century prior, the 1800s, had seen laws in place that prohibited people from having a swim at the beach during the day in Sydney.

Over time, as attitudes towards public decency evolved, there was a significant increase in the number of beachgoers.

Being girt by sea as we are, it is hardly surprising that by the early 1900s, Australian coastal towns had developed a culture of swimming, and we still have that in place.

More people taking a dive into the ocean meant more risk of people drowning.



Something needed to be done to ensure public safety and that Australian spirit of volunteerism did what it's always done for us.

It brought together those selfless 23 blokes with a vision to have experienced divers and swimmers go out at sea and start rescuing folks from drowning as needed.

Since its establishment, the volunteers at the Bondi Surf Club have saved an estimated 600,000 lives.

Although still a matter of fierce debate, Bondi claims to be home to the world's oldest surf lifesaving club.

Stories like the establishment of this innately charitable institution in 1907 tells the world we're not just about a 'laid back' culture with a 'fair go' or the sun, the surf and the snags.

We're more than that.

We are a nation of volunteers, built by volunteers for volunteers, and long may that continue to be the case.

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