

Piha Surf Life Saving Club – Guardians of the Iron Sands

Five Waitemata Rugby Club members formed the legendary Piha Surf Life Saving Club on 10 January 1934 while sitting around one of their number's dining room table with a keg of beer and a bowl of sausages. Bert Holt had brought a section in the subdivision of Piha by the Rayner Estate and he persuaded his two brothers, Stan and Cliff, and club members, Frank Ross and Laurie Wilson, that there was a need to keep the beach safe. Ross became the first chairman and Wilson the first club captain. They adopted the red, black and green colours of their rugby club, representing the Western sunsets, iron sands and forests, and they were practically supported by Has Sidford of the newly formed Auckland Surf Association, who found them a belt and reel then promptly joined up himself.ⁱ

Quickly a distinguished and long serving group joined their ranks, most elite sportsmen from a range of codes including rugby (Freddie Lucas and Tom Pearce), rugby league (the Hall brothers), swimming (Max Cleary and Wally Jarvis), gymnastics (Charlie Curtice), cycling (Ronnie Foubister), boxing (Jackie Jenkins) and wrestling (Hadyn Way). They were quick to adopt every new life saving technique and water sport, and established a club culture of ruggedness and courage in the tough surf conditions that prevail on the beach.

Piha was the first surf club to be formed on the West Coast of Auckland - earlier Auckland clubs being clustered on Waitemata Harbour beaches - ahead of Karekare (1935), and Muriwai (1938). It acted with great speed to get the essentials of a fully functioning club. In the second season, a clubhouse was opened on beachfront land donated by the Rayner Estate, dedicated by the Rev Colin Scrimgeour "Uncle Scrim" over the radio, said to be the first occasion on which a club pavilion had been dedicated over the airwaves.

In the same year a surfboat was purchased from the Bronte Club in Sydney, and the club took on the role of promoting the sport to other clubs, itself winning the first national surfboat championship at the 1940 Centennial Championships at Lyall Bay. In 1938 it ordered a purpose-built boat from the premier boat-building firm of WM Ford in Sydney, specially strengthened to withstand Piha's heavy dumping surf and the fact that all the crew were big men.

Predating by more than two decades the surfing craze, in 1936 the club took possession of two enormous Hawaiian surf boards, one a Tom Blake "cigar board", the other said to have been owned by Duke Kahanamoku, and in the same season imported two surf skis from Australia. These were used to perform the first ski rescues in New Zealand. Using his woodwork skills, and sometimes working on his sitting room floor, club member Don Wright perfected his "tear drop" surf ski as an efficient rescue craft. It became the standard piece of rescue equipment for the next thirty years and Wright played a key role in spreading the ski through the country. At the 1947 nationals at Fitzroy – which Wright won – all competitors raced on skis he had built.

Piha survived the war with services augmented by schoolboys, although two overseas servicemen on R&R drowned at the beach. Piha itself lost five club members overseas four of them fighter pilots. In 1950 the club hosted the first ever international surf life saving test held in New Zealand when, in the presence of the Prime Minister Sid Holland, a New Zealand team (with two Piha team members, Wright and Peter Bevin) contested Australia in the first of what would be three tests.

A style-leading new clubhouse was opened in 1952 aiding the club in attracting new young members. They quickly adopted the new sport of Malibu board riding brought to the Piha club in November 1958 by two crew-cutted Californian lifeguards, Rick Stoner and Bing Copeland, whose restored Velzy boards now hang in the club. Every lifeguard of the era can remember the day they gathered on the beach to watch the two Yanks be crushed by the heavy Piha surf, only to gape in wonder as they rode sideways on the waves right into the shore. Copeland began crafting boards at the club which were snapped up by other clubs, and club member Peter Byers took this over, becoming one of the pioneers of board construction.

The arrival of the rescue tube in the early 1970s, introduced to Auckland by Muriwai member, John Thomas, revolutionised rescue methods. By 1975, of 36 rescues, 23 were tube rescues and the reel and surf ski are not even mentioned. By this stage the Sir John Logan Campbell Hamilton jet boat was operating off Piha beach, patrolling the whole coast. Piha's Rodger Curtice was Auckland's powercraft controller and Don Wright's son "Bluey" Wright, later powercraft controller for New Zealand, worked with Hamilton jets to make the boats easier to handle and more "idiot-proof". They were, Wright recalled, "a sledgehammer to crack a nut" and were superseded by the arrival of IRBs in which development Wright also played a key role.

But before that development, the legendary rescue helicopter service began operating from Piha. Demonstrating how Piha connections have repeatedly worked to bring about surf life saving innovation, the service was developed by the Auckland Surf Life Saving Association, at the time chaired by Piha member Denis Black, and financed in the early years by Rothmans and the Auckland Regional Authority whose chair was Piha member Tom Pearce, and for many years Curtice was the service's controller. The helicopter service was seen as getting around the challenges of remote surf-lashed beaches, and the tortuous unsealed roads into the city when medical care was needed. The first helicopter was a Mash-style Hiller 12B, from which intrepid lifeguards leapt with a rescue tube and were then lifted, dangling, into the shore. The early service eventually developed into the regional Westpac emergency service.

Perhaps the most famous person to be brought in dangling off the carabiners was Rob Muldoon, an avid supporter of surf life saving, who opened the rebuilt clubhouse in 1977 and thrilled the onlookers by gamely leaping from the helicopter and being brought in by line, then leaping a second time before being rescued by jet boat. When asked if he saw any sharks, Muldoon quipped "When they see me coming they go for their lives."

Social innovation marked the 1970s. At last, in 1979, under threat from the Auckland association, and losing points in competition, Piha accepted women members, and in 2000, Anna Schubert became the first woman club captain. Nippers were formed in 1970, although there had been earlier attempts to have junior members. In fact there were girl Nippers before there were women members in the club. In 1994 Piha began the first of regular exchanges with junior lifeguards from California's Huntington Beach, a recent tradition much valued by the club. By 2009 there were 200 members of what is now called junior Surf, and a number of the junior members have gone on to play leading roles in the club's sports success, senior life guarding and leadership of the club.

With its old clubhouse literally rotting away and fire and safety standards breached, the club undertook to raise nearly one million dollars to build a new clubhouse. Opened in 1996, a large restaurant and bar were central in the new clubhouse, but the most innovative feature was its first

aid room, designed by then first aid officer, and third generation club member, Jonathon Webber, and acknowledged to be the best in the country. With a large number of rescues each year, as well as falls from rocks and medical emergencies, the room is well used. It regularly features as the scene of heart-stopping dramas on the television reality series, Piha Rescue, begun in 2003. The series has made some Piha lifeguards household names and raised the profile of the club immensely. It has also eased the path for Piha and other clubs to gain sponsorship and increased public understanding of the role of lifeguarding.

Another spin-off has been the ability to gain sponsorship for the international Day of Giants and Big Wave Classic surf boat series held at Piha each February. These were the brain child of ex-Kiwi Mark “Horse” Bourneville, who, inspired by the historic images of early Piha boaties on the clubhouse walls, started the contests in 2005, helping the revival of the heroic and entertaining sport of surf boat racing. In February 2010, there were 35 boats and 46 crews on Piha beach, six from Australia.

The last decade has seen less high profile but necessary innovation – the restructuring of the club’s management and governance under the leadership of then president, Larry Rountree, and chairman and then president, Peter Brown. A paid manager was employed in 2006 and the first board of directors was appointed in 2007. Although these changes are recent, the club has already seen the benefits, and as it celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2009, was in good shape to keep the beach safe for the next 75 years.

Sandra Coney

ⁱ This essay is based on the book Piha – Guardians of the Iron Sands by Sandra Coney, published by the Piha Surf Life Saving Club in 2009.