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**FROM BONDI TO BUDE AND BEYOND:  
EXPORTING AUSTRALIAN SURF LIFESAVING IN THE 1950s \***

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\*Today's Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) was previously known as the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia (SLSA of A), the title in use in the 1950s. The less cumbersome present day title has been substituted in this paper.

## FROM BONDI TO BUDE AND BEYOND:

### EXPORTING AUSTRALIAN SURF LIFESAVING IN THE 1950s

Surf lifesaving, the best known feature of Australia's beach culture, first appeared at Sydney's Bondi beach in 1907, then spread to other beaches in New South Wales, and in 1909 to Cottesloe in Western Australia. Very slowly, other States followed this example. Further afield, in New Zealand and South Africa for example, beaches were also patrolled by voluntary lifesavers organized into clubs, but their methods and allegiance belonged to the older British-based Royal Life Saving Society (RLSS). It took occasional visits over many decades, demonstrations and persuasion for the more efficient Australian methods to be adopted. In Britain there were no clubs and no voluntary patrols. Instead poorly trained lifeguards using crude equipment watched over paddlers and swimmers. Forty-six years after the foundation of the first surf lifesaving club in the world, an identical organization appeared at Bude, North Cornwall. Allan Kennedy, an Australian government public servant temporarily working in London, successfully instructed and examined eleven men for surf lifesaving's primary award, the Bronze medallion. They became the founding members of the Bude Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC), providing tangible evidence of a successful, if unusual, Australian export to Britain.

Two years later, in 1955 with three clubs in existence, at Kennedy's urging the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain was formed. Thereafter growth was rapid. By 1965 there were 28 clubs, 18 of them in Cornwall, and others in Devon, Dorset, Sussex, Wales and Scotland. Almost 1,000 members were qualified to use Australian methods and equipment, and each summer the number of drownings fell. Furthermore, surf lifesaving competition flourished, with national championships being held annually. Little noticed, if at all by the

Australian government, surf lifesaving had colonized many of Britain's most popular beaches.

But how and why did the first club appear in 1953, the year of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, the year too when England's Test cricketers regained the Ashes lost in 1934? And what led twelve months later to four and a half million BBC television viewers enjoying an hour-long exhibition of surf lifesaving drills and techniques on Bude's Crooklets Beach? The unfolding events of 1953-54 occurred because of the intersection of several factors: surf lifesaving competitions (carnivals) held in 1944 and 1945 by Australian servicemen at Tolcarne beach near Newquay, Cornwall; the vision and persistence of a well-known Australian surf lifesaver, Allan Kennedy; and Surf Life Saving Australia's (SLSA) haphazard way of attempting to colonise other countries' surfing beaches with its methods. The outcome was not only the appearance of surf lifesaving clubs in Britain; SLSA began to successfully explore new possibilities to internationalise surf lifesaving. The 1956 Melbourne Olympics were a catalyst for this, as well as the new found conviction among SLSA's leaders that Australian rescue techniques and competition *could* be exported worldwide.

## I

In 1944, soon after the successful D Day landings, two members of the RAAF, Squadron Leader Bruce Miles and Flight Sergeant Arthur Beard, both Australian surf lifesavers, were given approval to fly an aircraft around coastal south-western England. Their purpose was to locate a suitable venue for RAAF personnel to enjoy recreation leave. At the time the armed services were promoting sporting events for servicemen – mainly cricket, swimming, tennis and rugby union. Miles and Beard wanted a venue near good surf, for there were plenty of Australians eager to practice their surfing skills. Newquay seemed the best choice, and after landing at nearby St Mawgan they visited the town and beaches. With their first impressions

confirmed the Great Western Hotel was then commandeered, and this became a home from home for resting airmen.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the Australians who enjoyed leave in Cornwall were excellent body surfers. One or two of Newquay's beaches provided long, rolling waves, more gentle than the steep, powerful surf of Australia's east coast, but still challenging. Given their background, it was natural that after a few weeks these men began to plan a surf carnival for their own enjoyment, and that of any interested onlookers. In fact, on the day when it was eventually held, Sunday afternoon 3 September 1944, more than 5,000 spectators watched the competition at Tolcarne, with Australian and N.S.W. champions Bob Newbiggen and Arthur Beard prominent.<sup>2</sup> Beard also starred at a second carnival ten months later. According to the *Newquay Express*,

There was a crowd of spectators which must have numbered thousands, on the beach, the promenade overlooking the beach, and the surrounding cliffs. It really was a wonderful sight to see such a large crowd of spectators, many in gaily coloured beach attire...<sup>3</sup>

Judging by this and other reports, the Cornish were keen to see young Australian men cavorting in the sea and on the sand, but no-one seems to have considered that at the end of the war Newquay's beach attendants might use the Australian methods displayed at the carnivals. After all, there were no instructional handbooks to guide them, and the ancient reels, lines and belts used at the carnivals were returned to London. Nor apparently, did any of the recreating servicemen suggest that an Australian style surf lifesaving club be formed. What they did do was explore other beaches, always looking for surf similar to that in Australia. For Arthur Beard, Crooklets at Bude was THE surfing beach in Cornwall – and one he never forgot. In 1951 it was Beard who inspired Allan Kennedy to visit Bude.

Kennedy, born in 1908, was a New South Welshman who, until he was thirty, lived in Byron Bay on the State's north coast. After joining his local surf lifesaving club he soon gained all the awards available – Bronze medallion, Instructor's and Examiner's certificates.<sup>4</sup> Never a talented competitor, Kennedy threw himself into practical life saving activities; by 1934 he had become Chief Superintendent of the Far North Coast Branch in NSW. This meant total responsibility for all examinations for surf lifesaving awards and competitions held within the branch. Several years later, in 1937, Kennedy joined the Australian government public service and moved to Brisbane, Queensland, where he quickly made his mark in surf lifesaving circles, as superintendent of the Point Danger Branch, deputy state superintendent in 1939, and finally the top position in 1941. At the same time he became the State Centre's publicity officer, retaining both appointments until the 1946-47 summer.

Being in a situation second in status and power to the State Centre president, Kennedy was someone who was listened to, especially when he spoke on practical lifesaving matters. During World War II he proved to be innovative and resourceful, firstly by training Bronze squads of Brisbane-based lifesavers mid-week under lights at the city's showgrounds. Beach and surf work were done on weekends when squads travelled to the coast.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, when an alarming number of US servicemen drowned in Gold Coast surf (the deaths being publicised by Kennedy) he persuaded the US army to replace their poorly trained lifeguards with servicemen instructed by him in Australian surf lifesaving methods. Usually Bronze squad training meandered along for six to eight weeks, sometimes longer. Kennedy's initial three squads – 18 men – completed the course in three weeks, having been worked six hours a day, seven days a week. As American journalist Bede Maxwell later wrote, '...for the three years during which the US forces remained in Australia the lifesaver MPs became an institution, winning many friends. Kennedy's work in training more than 30 of these men was especially commended...'.<sup>6</sup>

So far the picture of Kennedy is of an 'on the beach' leader, but he was more than this. Very fit and energetic, with rapid-fire speech and quick movements, he was totally immersed in surf lifesaving. Furthermore, unlike many of his contemporaries, he thought about its future. As he and everyone else knew, surf lifesaving in Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia was controlled by SLSA's NSW Head Centre, based in Sydney. In the minds of those powerbrokers, that was where all the movement's wisdom resided, something Kennedy disagreed with. As far as he was concerned the status-quo blocked progress. He asked awkward questions: why couldn't the Australian Championships be moved from NSW where they had been held since 1915? Why weren't judges from other states involved in the Championships? Wasn't it time to replace the Head Centre (rule from, and by Sydney) with a NATIONAL body, a federation of the states, all with equal voting rights? In other words Kennedy was a visionary.

When World War II ended he successfully pursued all of these issues. In the meantime, in 1947 he was transferred to Victoria where he was a driving force behind the formation of Surf Lifesaving's Victorian State Centre. And, energetic as ever, Kennedy became the state's first superintendent. In the same year he was the first non-NSW manager of a combined Queensland-NSW instructional team that visited WA. But twelve months later the Department of Commerce and Agriculture transferred him back to Brisbane. At this point Allan Kennedy's surf lifesaving career stalled. As Queensland's deputy superintendent again (1949-1950) he was frustrated. His talents and enormous energy needed some outlet. An outstanding if demanding instructor, his intensive training model had still to be widely accepted. So he chafed, looking for a new challenge. Soon he found it, for in 1951 he applied to be transferred to Australia House in London. Why not import surf lifesaving into Great Britain where the now old-fashioned Royal Life Saving Society was dominant? Why not indeed?

When he chose to move overseas, Kennedy knew as well as anyone the history of attempts to export Australian surf lifesaving methods. To be blunt, they had failed. An early (1919) NSW Head Centre Annual Report had informed its readers that, 'It is the intention of your Executive to further negotiate for the formation of similar bodies [to the Association] in other states of the Commonwealth and New Zealand'.<sup>7</sup> And it was the Head Centre secretary Donald McIntyre who explained how 'Our propaganda is being spread wherever open beach bathing exists, and it can be safely said that our handbook represents the world's textbook on lifesaving in the surf'.<sup>8</sup> The words were striking; the reality was that by the 1940s the most continuous links were with New Zealand, South Africa and Hawaii, the first two beach strongholds of RLSS, the third proudly displaying a different professional (paid lifeguards) culture to Australian volunteerism. In several countries Australian reels could be found on beaches, and hundreds of handbooks were sent overseas. Teams visited New Zealand in 1937, Hawaii in 1939 and New Zealand again in 1950, but progress was glacially slow, and in each instance the focus was on competition as well as instruction in Australian lifesaving methods.

As for Great Britain, tentative attempts were made in the 1930s. There was also an ambitious plan to send an Australian team to Britain as part of a global tour, but nothing eventuated.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the best model (and Kennedy was aware of this) was Bondi SLSC's Harry Nightingale, who during and after World War II single handedly developed embryonic club based surf lifesaving in Sri Lanka. As a swimming coach living there Nightingale was successful because his impact was the opposite of the normal 'hit and run' team visit.<sup>10</sup> Time and persistence were the keys to progress.

By 1951 when Allan Kennedy was preparing to sail to London the newly formed (1949) National Council of SLSA was still focusing on New Zealand, South Africa and Honolulu, as the former Head Centre had done for 20 years. Before leaving, Kennedy discussed his tentative plans to import and establish Australian surf lifesaving methods with National



Council president Adrian Curlewis and secretary Ken Watson.<sup>11</sup> However their enthusiastic support, together with promises of handbooks and equipment, could not disguise the reality that everything would be left to Kennedy. His idea, that an individual could succeed where teams had enjoyed little success, was the antithesis of surf lifesaving's thinking. What Kennedy knew was that he would be in England for several years, and he was an expert instructor. So the scene was set.

One of Kennedy's attributes, especially in surf lifesaving matters, was careful, even fastidious preparation. In his own words, 'In 1951 in a discussion with Arthur Beard and the late Jack Dillon [previously publicity officer for the Head Centre] the former told of the surf in Cornwall, saying 'that the best surf was seen at Bude...'.<sup>12</sup> This information from Beard was the beginning of the journey to Bude on Cornwall's north-east coast. Interestingly, Kennedy wanted to begin a club on the best SURF beach, that is, in Australian terms, where the best body surfing was to be found. Like most Australian surf lifesavers, or surfmen as they were referred to at the time, he assumed that as in his own country the biggest crowds would be found at beaches with the most consistent waves. In fact Cornwall was rather different to his previous experience.

The county had been popular with sun and surf seeking holiday makers since the late nineteenth century. Allegedly blue summer skies and warm seas led to the county being referred to as 'the Cornish Riviera'. Each summer thousands of up-country city dwellers were attracted to its coves, beaches and cliffs. Few could swim, more surfed, and most paddled knee-deep in the waves. Until the 1970s the most popular form of surfing was 'belly-boarding' on 'coffin lids'. Usually made by the local undertaker they consisted of two or three pine planks held together by three cross cleats, while more refined, varnished versions were made of marine ply, with a rounded nose curved upwards. Surfers using these boards could not go beyond their depth because to catch waves they needed to push off from the seabed. Boards were hired – and inflatable rubber surf-o-planes too. Very few people body surfed

and almost no-one swam onto waves. Unhappily, during the short summer season drownings were common – sometimes several at a single beach - for safety in the surf was not a local government priority.

At Newquay and other popular beaches before World War II, ‘beach attendants’ were on duty in summer. The term ‘lifeguard’ did not appear in a Newquay guidebook until 1948.<sup>13</sup> Employed by local councils at the busiest beaches, attendants offered some kind of reassurance to swimmers about their safety. Flags were flown indicating high and low tides and when it was unsafe to enter the sea. Rescue equipment was basic: the *Newquay Express* describing a July 1938 rescue said the beach attendant used a lifeline and lifebuoy, towing both to his victim.<sup>14</sup> Reels were not portable, lifelines were heavy and often found in poor condition, and the lifebuoys or harnesses were cumbersome devices which meant that in heavy seas the rescuer struggled to reach the patient.

When he did, the two of them were in danger of being drowned as they were rapidly hauled ashore by over enthusiastic by-standers. There was even one post-war instance of the line being attached to a landrover so the haul-in could be even faster!<sup>15</sup> But far worse was the rescuer’s life threatening problem with the lifebuoy or harness. If he found himself in trouble because of pressure on the line (for example because of masses of kelp) he had no way of quickly releasing himself. It was a nightmarish scenario; not surprisingly, wherever he went in Cornwall Kennedy found that every lifeguard was eager to get a newly introduced (in Australia) Ross Safety Belt with its quick-release pin mechanism. So, in 1952-53 there was a receptiveness to change in the county.

## II

When he arrived in London as a dairy produce inspector for the Australian government, Allan Kennedy quickly realized others could help him. For example Australia’s High Commissioner

was Sir Thomas White, who previously in Australia had been national president of the Royal Life Saving Society (1934-51), so he was familiar with, and sympathetic to, Kennedy's objectives. Furthermore, Australia House had a formidable press office and good contacts with all major newspapers, as well as the BBC. Publicity through these sources would certainly help. Then there were Australians visiting England or passing through on the way to, or from, the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. Among them were active surf lifesavers who Kennedy knew would be willing to help if he required assistance. And finally, working in the migration office in Australia House was Col Hendy, ex North Bondi SLSC and someone who shared Kennedy's passion to see clubs formed firstly at Bude, then elsewhere. Kennedy had found his right hand man. Between the two of them, they transformed British beaches.

Of course with a full-time job Kennedy had only limited hours for promoting surf lifesaving, and in some of his scarce spare time he also intended visiting beaches in Europe. Indeed it is likely that only someone with his energy and passion could have achieved so much, beginning with an Easter 1952 visit to Jersey. As he later wrote, 'After spending four days in Jersey, photos, maps and a report of the beaches was [sic] forwarded to Australia, [to Ken Watson] special mention being made of St Ouens Beach where a fine surf was running'.

<sup>16</sup>This then was the forerunner to his long planned arrival in Bude.

Accompanied by a friend from Australia House, Kennedy finally saw Bude for the first time on 1 May. In his own words,

Next day we viewed a beautiful surf with waves rolling nearly 300 yards, and exclaimed 'what a surf and a place for surfing', and soon after donned a costume and had my first surf at Bude, with the company of a seal swimming near the rocks.<sup>17</sup>

As he later confessed, the sea was very cold, so after several waves Kennedy began a day or two of discussions about the likelihood of a surf lifesaving club receiving the town's

support. The local lifeguard, Bernard Lamb, was very enthusiastic. He also complained about the dangerous lifesaving equipment he used so Kennedy promised to bring him an Australian safety belt. Next stop was the Harbour Master, E B Maynard, who managed Bude's beaches. He was less enthusiastic. Hoping to win his support Kennedy spent time reassuring Maynard that he would be totally committed to seeing a club formed and would do everything possible to help. After once more taking photos and a movie film Kennedy then moved on to Newquay, where 'the possibilities for surfing noted'.<sup>18</sup>

He now recognized that he required equipment so that he could demonstrate Australian methods. Therefore in a letter to Watson written as soon as he returned to London, Kennedy requested a fully equipped reel, line and belt, a second belt, handbooks, an instructional film, and later, a surf ski and paddle.<sup>19</sup> Until these were delivered there was little he could do. Shortage of time meant that he did not return to Bude in 1952, but in September he persuaded the President of SLSA's Victorian State Centre, Ainslie Walker who was returning from Helsinki, to visit both Bude and Newquay. Kennedy was confident that support in Australia would be boosted if Walker told Watson and Curlewis that he would very likely succeed in his efforts to form a club. Walker, no doubt primed by Kennedy, duly did so. 'Alan [sic] Kennedy has the position well in hand, and is making every effort to bring about the establishment of the movement in England'. Walker added, 'Their (Cornish lifeguards) present method of surf live-saving is most primitive', implying that the very different and far safer Australian techniques and equipment would be gratefully received.<sup>20</sup>

By February 1953 Kennedy was gearing up for a massive effort at Bude, his aim being Bronze medallion squads and then a club. The reel, line and belt had arrived so he was ready to begin. This time his contact in the town was Fred Lester of the Trevoze Guest House, Walker having told Kennedy that he (Lester) was 'interested in the prospects of local surfing'. As the 'official overseas representative of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia' Kennedy impressed on Lester his availability to help train members and form a

club, listing the equipment he would use to do so.<sup>21</sup> Soon afterward Kennedy was in Bude, discussing his proposition with Lester who promised to gauge the level of support in the town. If that materialized Kennedy undertook to take a week's leave to train a team, but by the end of June nothing had happened.<sup>22</sup> Lester made contact with the British Legion, and the leader of the local youth club who found several members willing to be involved, but the summer was ebbing away. Knowing how little time he had Kennedy returned to Bude to meet Maynard and also J C Ball, an officer of the Bude-Stratton Urban District Council.<sup>23</sup> They too offered support but still there was no break through – a squad willing to be trained.

Kennedy later explained his frustration at this inaction:

After a number of letters the writer became somewhat impatient as a surf reel line and belt had arrived in November 1952 and a surf ski on the 19<sup>th</sup> June 1953 and stated that if there was no further interest he would go to the press and offer to go to any locality where there was surf and do all possible to form a surf lifesaving club there.<sup>24</sup>

The threat worked. On 28 July 1953 an Australia House press release announced that 'Britain's first surf life-saving club, organized wholly on Australian surf life-saving principles, will be formed at Bude, Cornwall, next week'. Sir Thomas White's 'close interest' and support were mentioned, and Kennedy's intention to 'instruct local swimmers in general surf life-saving routine, including reel and belt work, resuscitation methods, rescues and releases and the handling of the surf ski', was highlighted.<sup>25</sup>

On Sunday 2 August 1953 Bude holidaymakers and swimmers must have been amazed when a group including two or three members of the youth club, lined up at Crooklets to subject themselves to Kennedy's voluble instructions. The reel, line and belt, plus the ski were on the beach, and training continued in the evenings, together with films. Here was a

return to the intensive training methods developed with the US servicemen in World War II, and once more they were successful. Eventually, on 9 August two squads totalling 11 members, ages ranging from 16 to 39, successfully passed the exam for the Bronze medallion. Three Australians assisted Kennedy with instruction and the examination, which once more sparked great interest among Crooklets beachgoers. In every way it had been a successful week; when Kennedy showed films obtained from Australia House the chairman and several members of the District Council were present. It led to the Council's clerk, Fred Dredge, announcing his eagerness to see the club succeed, and ultimately agreeing to be its foundation secretary.<sup>26</sup> This direct link between club and Council became invaluable in the years ahead.

Besides the Bronze exam, 9 August was memorable for two other events: the squad members agreed to form the Bude Surf Life Saving Club, and the BBC made a broadcast of their activities as well as an 11 minute film. Kennedy prompted both. The publicity in the London and county press was, according to him, 'really extraordinary', and was a prelude to what followed in the summer of 1954.<sup>27</sup>

The widespread attention did more than benefit the instructor and his squads. Three days after the exam, in his capacity as clerk of the District Council, Fred Dredge informed Kennedy that,

At the monthly meeting of the Council's Beaches Committee which was held last evening, reference was made to the groundwork which you have done in Bude during the past ten days or so in training young men here in Surf Life Saving.

For some years now we have been trying to establish a Life Saving Club and it appears that at last, through your good efforts, some interest has been instilled in the matter and a Club will be formed which will be of considerable benefit to the District. The Beaches Committee was, of course, particularly

pleased about this; equally pleased were they that your efforts have brought considerable publicity to Bude during the past week.<sup>28</sup>

Implicit in this, and perhaps the involvement of the guest house proprietor Fred Lester, was the realization that Bude's reputation as a summer holiday destination could only be enhanced by advertising the presence of a surf lifesaving club. If the regular drownings were reduced, more people would flock to Bude and business would boom. Australian surf lifesaving was attention-getting and good for the entire town. No wonder so many residents were pleased with the club's formation. Flags on the beach and regular patrols signified a new era of beach safety in Cornwall.

### III

For the irrepressible Kennedy this was no more than the beginning. To him it was not sufficient merely to have well drilled patrols on the beach on evenings and weekends for the remainder of the summer. From his Australian experience Kennedy knew that it would require time and effort to keep the club together over the long winter months. If that was successful he could then consolidate the club's existence in the 1954 summer. Another goal was to foster the growth of additional clubs, in Cornwall and in other counties. With the example of Bude, Kennedy hoped this would be sooner rather than later. Two or three more clubs could then be the nucleus of a Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain, a body which could partly replace Kennedy in encouraging and guiding growth. In all these goals he probably exceeded his own expectations.

By August 1953 he had motivated Fred Dredge and J C Ball to take an ongoing interest in the growth of the Bude club. They, with others, were responsible for a September special meeting of the Council to formalise what had occurred after the Bronze exam. Attended by many of the town's 'notables', the meeting agreed to form a management committee for the

new body, with various local organizations being represented.<sup>29</sup> From this point onwards Bude SLSC was an acknowledged presence in the town. Thereafter, one of its major objectives was to find a suitable home for equipment and a place to practice drills during winter. Eventually a small hut became the first of several clubrooms.

Kennedy was back in Bude in mid-October to present the foundation members with their Bronze medallions. Seizing another opportunity to publicise surf lifesaving, he brought with him more films that were shown to a packed audience at the Women's Institute hall.<sup>30</sup> In the months that followed he continued to visit the town, re-injecting the club and supporters with his infectious enthusiasm, and training new members for the 1954 summer.

At this point Kennedy knew that he needed more equipment, in particular a second reel, as the first was now in regular use at Bude. Sensing that he was making progress in a way never imagined a year or so earlier, SLSA's Watson and Curlewis arranged for a reel to be donated for use in England.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately Queen Elizabeth II during her 1954 tour of Australia had been a spectator at a surf lifesaving carnival held at Bondi. She and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, were very impressed by the display, so much so that she agreed that the reel could be transported to England aboard the Royal Yacht *Gothic*. Kennedy made sure that the '*Gothic* reel' as it became known was soon in use, for the surf life saving word was spreading.

In February 1954 George Williams, a veteran Newquay lifeguard, wrote to Kennedy requesting a copy of the SLSA handbook. Williams had heard about the Bude club and wanted to know more.<sup>32</sup> Kennedy, of course, saw this as an opportunity, so the handbook was quickly sent. During his 1952 visit to Newquay Ainslie Walker had met Hugh Chegwiddden who was curious to learn about Australian surf lifesaving methods. Hoping to widen interest in the town beyond Williams to others, Kennedy contacted Chegwiddden, but nothing happened. Then in July the Newquay District Council's E H Trembath requested a



beach demonstration and film night.<sup>33</sup> Whether this took place is unknown, for the Newquay club did not come into existence until 1958.

During the same month, July, there was a major breakthrough much closer to London. As Kennedy explained in his report to SLSA, 'First visit to Brighton was made on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1954, after 4 visits and five weeks training, 7 members qualified for the bronze medallion and the Brighton club was formed and affiliated with the SLSA of Australia'.<sup>34</sup> Employing his proven formula for establishing a new surf lifesaving organisation, Kennedy used the '*Gothic reel*', handbooks and films, together with his own determination. At the same time he was not neglecting Bude; in what was a frantically busy summer, by August his winter training produced two members who passed the Bronze exam, three their instructor's certificate, while seven women acquired resuscitation certificates. This was a major gain for the new club, while also becoming the catalyst for a remarkable publicity coup.

As mentioned earlier, Allan Kennedy was always aware of the promotional power of the media. With Australia House, newspapers and the BBC willing to assist, he planned to present the Bude club to the world, a weekend extravaganza of surf lifesaving. This was a major effort to embed surf lifesaving in Britain. The publicity prior to the event attracted plenty of interest, including an enquiry to Fred Dredge from the Cornish village of St Agnes about the likelihood of a demonstration on the local beach.<sup>35</sup> Kennedy and the BBC nominated the weekend of 28 - 29 August for Cornwall's first surf carnival since 1945. With the assistance of eight Australian surf lifesavers holidaying or working in Britain, Kennedy formed them and the Bude members into three teams. Together they presented an exhibition of surf lifesaving drills, methods of rescue and resuscitation and surfing. Marching to and fro, drilling and performing mock rescues the teams were televised live (55 minutes) by the BBC on Saturday, with a 30 minute follow-up the next day. A viewing audience estimated at a staggering four and a half million people was stunning proof of interest in this Australian import.<sup>36</sup> As well, because it was Bude SLSC which was on display, the club now had a

responsibility to nurture and expand the movement. Inevitably the weekend also included an evening film show 'upon the subject of Surf Life Saving and Coastal Scenery in Australia and the Tropics...described by Mr Allan Kennedy (of the Australian Surf Life Saving Society)...'.<sup>37</sup>

The weekend was an appropriate finale to his almost three years in Great Britain. As he flew to the USA in September 1954, the first stage of the journey to his next posting in Perth, Western Australia, Kennedy must have been happy with his successes. Peter Cloke (Bude's club captain) and a team had been invited to St Agnes, while Col Hendy was preparing to play midwife to the birth of the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain. Kennedy's smile would have broadened when he later heard from Cloke that Bude followed his method of introducing surf lifesaving to a new audience: at St Agnes Fred Lester announced the team by loud-speaker, and described what was happening; 'rescue and release and 1 man carry, marching with a reel and line drill then followed alarm reel to finish'. On the same afternoon the team moved on to nearby Perranporth where a crowd of 2000 had gathered to watch them.<sup>38</sup> It was an unforgettable day, and Kennedy would have been pleased with 'his boys'. Before Christmas 1954 St Agnes became Cornwall's second club.

#### IV

Early in 1955 Kennedy, now in Perth, was heartened by more good news. Australia House's Col Hendy informed him that in the time he (Hendy) had available he was doing everything he could to help clubs, in particular Brighton and St Agnes. Having delayed an earlier meeting to form a national association, Hendy decided to go ahead when he journeyed to St Agnes for a film night.<sup>39</sup> Members arrived from the other clubs and under Kennedy's previous guidance, as described by Roger Dunford (Brighton SLSC),

...on February 27<sup>th</sup> a bonny bouncing Surf Life Saving Baby was safely delivered to Great Britain at St Agnes, by Brighton out of Bude. It was given

a lusty voice in the form of D H Ohlson as Publicity Officer, Brain-power by Col Hendy, heart of Bude, Brighton and St Agnes S.L.S.C.'s.<sup>40</sup>

Sir Thomas White agreed to be patron, Dunford secretary/treasurer and Kennedy supplied the initial life-blood of £25, a presentation made to him by the BBC after the August 1954 extravaganza. Due to his initiative and tireless work the foundations of surf lifesaving in Great Britain had been laid.

Allan Kennedy was a proud man, not overtly so, but someone who knew his unique place in the surf lifesaving world before he was transferred to England. There, he created history – clubs and an association reflecting his ideas and outlook. As he wrote in a report to SLSA, 'My first visit was made to Bude (Cornwall) in April 1952. Since that date over 8,500 miles have been travelled to Bude, Polzeath, Newquay and Perranporth. Seventeen visits were made to Bude four to Polzeath and Newquay and three to Perranporth'.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore Kennedy also found time to visit beaches in Jersey, France (Biarritz), Spain and the Netherlands (The Hague). Then, on his homeward journey to Perth the USA and Hawaii were added to the list. Kennedy now knew more about international lifesaving than anyone in Australia.

Meanwhile Bude was never far from his thoughts. Paramount among them was the idea that Great Britain could send a team to compete at the international surf lifesaving carnival planned by SLSA to coincide with the Melbourne Olympics. Almost all of his English correspondents, and certainly those at Bude, were regularly reminded of this. Another pet topic was the necessity for a well equipped clubhouse. When, in May 1955, Fred Dredge told him that a temporary 22ft x 22ft wooden hut had been built at Crooklets, Kennedy's response was the same as it had been in 1953. He commended the council for its help; 'However, I feel the Club and the members and the work that they have done not only for

surf life saving, but also for Bude itself, warrants at the appropriate time, a permanent Club House'.<sup>42</sup> A year later Dredge could barely disguise his delight when he informed Kennedy that the Council was spending almost £400 on a project both men regarded as a necessity.<sup>43</sup>

Naturally Kennedy was also intent on Bude taking a leading role in 'spreading the word' about surf lifesaving. The August 1954 televised displays at Bude led to a wave of interest in Jersey. Bude's secretary was contacted about the possibility of a visit by a demonstration team and this was quickly arranged for the end of May 1955.<sup>44</sup> Kennedy was re-assured by the knowledge that Bude members were so willing to foster interest elsewhere.

Another lesson learned by his disciples was the value of publicity for stimulating interest, and support. Again it was Fred Dredge who showed he had absorbed Kennedy's teachings. In May 1955 Dredge asked the latter:

I do not know whether you saw a copy of the Australian Women's Weekly dated 8 December, 1954, showing pictures of the [August] TV scenes here. My Council has had 40,000 copies of page 15 of this reproduced and we send a copy with each copy of the Bude Official Guide which goes out.<sup>45</sup>

As Kennedy hoped, Bude never overlooked an opportunity to raise public awareness of surf lifesaving.

## V

When he departed from Britain Allan Kennedy was determined to continue the internationalizing of Australian surf lifesaving. Indeed his success had increased his awareness of the possibilities for doing this. One way, as he had outlined previously, and mentioned yet again in his final report on his English activities, was:

Formation of a World Life Saving Body [that] would help the universal spread of Surf life saving. It might be possible for members from various parts of the world to attend a meeting to handle this matter sometime during the Olympic Games in 1956.<sup>46</sup>

Through his persistence Kennedy persuaded Adrian Curlewis and Ken Watson to pursue the concept, the outcome being the inaugural meeting in November 1956 of the International Council of Surf Life Saving, the predecessor of today's International Life Saving Federation.<sup>47</sup>

Another of Kennedy's visions was the introduction of international competition, not with Australia travelling to another country so only two nations were involved, but a truly international carnival involving all eligible countries. Once more he foresaw the Melbourne Olympics as a unique opportunity for this, with Great Britain's representation being tangible evidence of his successes there. Again SLSA ran with the idea, inviting teams from New Zealand, South Africa, and Hawaii, as well as Ceylon, USA and Great Britain, The presence of the last named (the single team member being Bude SLSC's Michael Martin) symbolized Kennedy's ground - breaking efforts three years earlier.<sup>48</sup>

Equally significant was the appearance of an American team, the result of another Kennedy initiative. When he arrived in the USA in September 1954 he was intent upon combining pleasure with the promotion of surf lifesaving. Beforehand Ken Watson had sent him a list of contacts SLSA had in North America, one in New York, the other the Naval Recruiting Station in California. There appeared to have been no knowledge of lifeguarding on the American west coast. After travelling through the mid-west to meet some of the former servicemen he had trained in Queensland during World War II, Kennedy moved on to California.<sup>49</sup>

Arriving there he quickly identified, and met, those he thought could play a useful part in introducing, or at the very least showing an interest in, Australian surf lifesaving methods. The Los Angeles Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Recreation and Parks that controlled beach lifeguards and the American Red Cross were particularly helpful. Furthermore Kennedy was taken on a tour of Los Angeles beaches by a lifeguard captain, John Dillon.<sup>50</sup> This gave him the opportunity to observe and evaluate the local rescue methods and equipment: lifeguard stations at regular intervals along beaches, two-way radio links, rescue tubes and boards, and small two-man dories – some of this gear later becoming standard equipment for beach patrols in Australia. Moreover Kennedy saw something else which grabbed his attention.

As he later told Watson, 'in a Santa Monica beach shed belonging to some organization there were quite a number of surf boards or as the Yanks call them paddle boards, these members journey to Malibu some distance North whenever the surf is running there'. Seeing the boards prompted Kennedy to demand that Watson invite 'anyone who can paddle a surfboard from the USA', especially from the Los Angeles area, to form an American team to compete at the planned 1956 international carnival.<sup>51</sup> Unknowingly Kennedy thereby hastened a far-reaching change in Australian beach culture, the rapid growth of surfing.

The November 1956 arrival of the California surfers with their balsa wood Malibu boards – Tom Zahn, Greg Noll, Tad Devine and Mike Bright among them - shook Australian board riders out of their torpor. Addicted to their long, hollow, toothpick boards, at Torquay (in Victoria), Avalon (NSW) and several other beaches, they were confronted with radically different boards and mesmerizing surfing techniques. As a result the decades long era of unchallenged body surfing and 'straight-in' board riding soon ended, and all because a middle-aged surf lifesaver dreamt of Australian lifesaving techniques conquering the world.<sup>52</sup> Instead, by the 1960s a dynamic surfing revolution was engulfing Australian beaches, much

to surf life saving's perpetual frustration. Kennedy, who was an eager body surfer and ski paddler, must have been left in head-shaking wonderment at this, because for him and many others, surfing's ethos was alien to surf lifesaving club life.

Besides promoting international links through meetings and competition, from his base in Perth Allan Kennedy turned his attention back to unfinished European business, in particular the possibilities of exporting surf lifesaving methods to Jersey in the Channel Islands, and Biarritz in France. After his solitary visit to the former at Easter 1952, Kennedy urged everyone who would listen that Jersey's relatively unguarded beaches would be ideal for the introduction of Australian techniques. The 1954 telecast from Bude was seen on the island, and in the following summer a Bude SLSC team was invited by the Jersey Life Guard Club to visit St Ouens beach. The team's demonstrations aroused great local interest and soon afterwards the Jersey club was given a grant of £1000 to spend on Australian equipment, particularly reels, lines and belts.<sup>53</sup>

Later, in his role as president of the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain, Col Hendy travelled to Jersey in 1957, examining club members for the Bronze medallion, setting up a Board of Examiners and making several recommendations about future developments, including women becoming full patrolling members. Allan Kennedy's persistence was one reason for Hendy's visit, which was followed 12 months later by Adrian Curlewis and a demonstration team consolidating what had been accomplished earlier.<sup>54</sup> Six years after Kennedy's visit to Jersey a thriving surf life saving club was in existence and Australian life guards were on weekday duty on several beaches.

The story of Biarritz was very different. When he saw the beach Kennedy had been struck by the surf conditions:

Biarritz in the Bay of Biscay has two beautiful surfing beaches with

Life Savers who patrol the beach and use flags. However these members cannot surf. A visit here would be sensational and our methods in surfing would be adopted overnight. Details of these methods have previously been forwarded from London.<sup>55</sup>

Here Kennedy based his hopes on the interest of the lifeguards and the dangers of long, rolling surf. As usual he told Hendy about his visit, prompting the latter to travel to Biarritz in the 1956 summer. Another Australian, Ian Proctor, heard about the surfing conditions so he too paid a brief visit, making contact with the lifeguards.<sup>56</sup> All three visitors agreed that they could be helped by using Australian equipment and rescue methods: after all, towing a line gripped in the rescuer's teeth, or tied around his waist had been abandoned in Australia almost half a century earlier! Building on Kennedy's initial efforts more instructional handbooks were sent, then in 1958 Curlewis, accompanied by a team of Australians, gave several demonstrations.

Meanwhile Kennedy was becoming increasingly restless. Despite being appointed manager-instructor of the Australian team for the 1956 International Carnival, he also wanted to continue as Australian surf lifesaving's overseas ambassador. He hoped to return to Cornwall, to take an international team to Biarritz, but nothing eventuated. In the middle of 1957 he changed direction, expressing a willingness to make an instructional visit to the British West Indies, Mexico and Chile.<sup>57</sup> Because SLSA was unable to finance this, he and Ken Watson prepared a submission to the Australian government, stressing not only Kennedy's qualifications and experience, but also his long service in the Department of Primary Industry (formerly Commerce and Agriculture), plus his knowledge of Australian dairy produce. The proposal was persuasive - part trade mission, part exporting surf lifesaving. However it was unsuccessful.<sup>58</sup>



Undeterred, Kennedy and Watson decided that the tour could be financed if SLSA could persuade the Australian government to increase its annual grant from the existing £5000. Part of the extra funding could then be employed to send Kennedy to the Americas. After much lobbying, in October 1958 the grant was lifted to £8000, but by then there was opposition to the plan in surf lifesaving circles, and after his successful European tour Curlewis could foresee other opportunities.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, Kennedy's overseas activities thereafter were mostly confined to Great Britain and Europe.

## VI

Several years before his 1952 departure for England, Kennedy explained to the American journalist, Bede Maxwell:

...politics played a big part in some spheres of Surfdom...but to cut a long story short, there is much that quite a number of the Sydney Surf Official [sic] could learn about, and take it from me they do not appreciate being taught some things by anybody really but particularly by anybody outside the Harbour City.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout his surf lifesaving career Kennedy was an innovator and a prophet. Those referred to above were far more conservative. Moreover, regarded as a Queenslander, some thought of him as an outsider; often the question asked by the Sydney powerbrokers was, 'What does he know'?

It was this apparent outsider status that may have motivated Kennedy. Unique training methods developed in World War II, outspoken advocacy for a National Council rather than control by NSW, formation of the Victorian State Centre, plus astute use of publicity – each of these jolted mainstream surf lifesaving. Kennedy knew too that before 1951 the inability of

SLSA to promote itself beyond familiar destinations overseas, retarded the likelihood of its methods and procedures gaining widespread international acceptance. Teams of competitors sent to Hawaii, New Zealand and later to South Africa strengthened ties with Australia, but substantial progress was slow. Disagreeing with the emphasis on competition, Kennedy was convinced that the only way to successfully transplant Australian surf lifesaving techniques was by concentrating on the introduction of Australian equipment, together with training in rescue and resuscitation methods, and the formation of volunteers into clubs, 'Hit and run' visits were not helpful – instead prolonged and continuous instruction was the answer. Firmly convinced of this Kennedy embarked on a very successful one man mission to take Australian surf lifesaving beyond its blinkered international limits.

Yet by some in Australian surf lifesaving these achievements have been under-rated. It is impossible to exaggerate Kennedy's importance in Great Britain's surf lifesaving history, for he introduced and nurtured the movement, founded two clubs, guided the formation of a third and planned the formation of the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain.

Australian methods and the unprecedented publicity they attracted, doomed the beach lifeguard training and equipment (such as it was) of the RLSS. Progress, Kennedy believed, depended on a community embracing surf lifesaving. This was the Bude model – motivating young men to learn Australian methods, while at the same time encouraging local support. Kennedy's unsurpassed knowledge, his skill as an instructor, together with his tireless enthusiasm and remarkable energy, ensured that the model was effective.

However it is his vision for the future of Australian surf lifesaving, and his achievement in gaining the support of the influential Ken Watson, that is so striking. Travel to several beaches in Europe and the Channel Islands convinced Kennedy that specialized surf lifesaving methods were needed, and could be successfully introduced, to other countries besides Great Britain. This practical internationalising might be accompanied by Australia's

promotion of competition, together with its creation and leadership of a world lifesaving governing body. By 1957 SLSA was achieving each of these objectives.

Finally, it was Kennedy who prompted the first substantial contacts between SLSA and the USA, in particular with Californian lifeguards and surfers. The repercussions of this for Australian surf lifesaving, and more widely, beach culture, were huge: on the one hand the gradual exposure of Australian surf lifesaving to alternative methods beach patrolling, rescue methods and competition, for example the rescue tube, extensive use of radio, and the ironman competition. On the other hand the unintentional outcome was a short board - led surfing revolution.

Throughout his career Allan Kennedy never doubted that the successful internationalising of surf lifesaving would rely primarily on the adoption by other countries of Australian equipment, together with rescue and resuscitation methods, not competition. He did not deny the latter's importance, but always regarded it as secondary to the life and death business of practical lifesaving. The result is that today Australian surf lifesaving has been exported from Bondi to Bude and beyond, bringing higher standards of beach safety to many countries throughout the world.<sup>61</sup>

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## END NOTES

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