



Deadly peril on summer afternoon

What began as a typical summer beach afternoon in the Illawarra ended in tragedy as Mother Nature again demonstrated her ability to produce the unexpected. But once again our unsung heroes of the sand demonstrated their courage, reports **MICHELLE HOCTOR**

ON Friday, January 21, Stanwell Park Beach was packed with about 200 swimmers enjoying the sun and cooling off from the summer heat.

By mid-afternoon the mix of families and children had been joined by a large group of people from a southern Sydney Christian youth group who also hit the waves.

Overseeing the activity was senior Wollongong City Council lifeguard John Boyle, a veteran of 25 years, with his offsiders Chanan Clark and Connor Cleary.

But as sea conditions changed, Mr Boyle's routine task of keeping swimmers between the flags was underscored by a growing sense of unease.

An earlier predicted groundswell was making its presence felt, combining with a low tide to stir up the water.

Positioned on the shoreline just before 4pm, Mr Boyle and Mr Clark watched as a set of larger waves approached swimmers who

were wading in knee-deep water on a shallow sandbank.

Alerted, Mr Clark grabbed a rescue board and paddled out while Mr Boyle and Mr Cleary unloaded a jet ski and rescue board.

At that moment, all hell broke loose.

Several large waves hit, sucking swimmers north and south of the flags and dumping them into a flash rip that began dragging them out to sea.

The beach erupted into a nightmare as about 40 panicked people began screaming, terrified they would drown as the waves continued to overwhelm them.

Surf Life Saving Illawarra vice-president Ken Holloway said Mr Clark paddled south, reaching four young adults and placing them on his board.

As he was doing so, he spotted a 63-year-old Perth man struggling to stay afloat.

"He was directly behind him, an elderly male doing it extremely

tough," Mr Holloway said.

"When the next wave came, he told the kids just to hang on, don't let go, and he pushed them towards the beach then swam back out."

But upon reaching the 63-year-old, he spotted two young women in distress several metres away, one of them submerged, and was faced with a dreadful predicament.

"He said to the bloke, 'Do you think you'll be all right if I let you go and get these girls?' He said, 'Yeah, I should be okay'. So he left him and went back and grabbed these two kids," Mr Holloway said.

In a remarkable test of strength and skill, Mr Clark raised the unconscious female to the surface and performed deep water resuscitation, while holding on to the second female.

"I don't know how he did it," Mr Holloway said.

"This is very difficult to perform if you're unaided by flotation.



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“You have to pull them up high enough and get your head over them so you can form a seal over their mouth and she came around. So he resuscitated this person in the water, while hanging on to another.

“Then another five young people jumped on him, treating him like a human life raft.”

Mr Clark instructed his group to remain calm with their heads above water as he scoured the surf for Mr Boyle and his jet ski.

It was then that he saw the scale of the crisis; a trail of people floating at least 200m out to sea and fighting to stay alive.

Mr Boyle was at the northern end, rescuing countless individuals before spotting the body of a 20-year-old Cabramatta man being pummelled by waves.

“Somehow Johnny was able to get the body and, while still keeping in control of the jet ski, placed him on the rescue board,” Mr Holloway said.

Mr Boyle returned the 20-year-old to the beach where he began CPR, shortly after joined by Adam Thompson, a 19-year-old off-duty Helensburgh-Stanwell Park lifesaver.

Together they worked to revive

him before paramedics arrived, allowing Mr Boyle to return to the water.

Meantime, Mr Cleary, who rescued about 15 people in total, travelled out on his board and found the 63-year-old.

“He paddled towards him, yelling out ‘Stay afloat! Stay Afloat!’,” Mr Holloway said.

“Then a wave hit and the man rolled over and Connor realised he was in bad shape, probably dead.

“He got to him and performed heart compressions whilst in the water. Then he somehow managed to lift him and bring him back on to the beach, then started performing CPR with no mask or anything.”

Mr Cleary was joined in his efforts by former lifeguard Kevin Morton and an off-duty nurse, and at one point it is believed the rescuers were able to gain a pulse, but it was not enough.

At one stage, rescuers were conducting CPR on five individuals simultaneously on the beach.

Alongside the incredible feats were standout acts of courage performed by everyday citizens.

They included 11-year-old Stanwell Park Public School student

Isaac Ridley.

The former Stanwell Park nipper swam out past his depth to assist a man almost three times his size back to shore.

“I went out and I brought in this big man. I said to him ‘hold my arm’ but he was so scared he flipped and held on to my back,” he said.

Helensburgh-Stanwell Park rookie lifesaver April Boughton, 14, assisted people from the water, helping one woman who had ingested sea water and a boy who refused to let go of the rescue board until he reached dry land.

Mr Holloway said a post-mortem examination later determined that the 63-year-old had suffered cardiac arrest. A report has emerged that it occurred after he had reached a sandbank and regained his footing.

The 20-year-old rescued by Mr

Boyle is expected to make a full recovery, alongside the other patients treated on the beach.

Mr Morton, who also rescued several people, rejected the “heroes” label.

“What are you going to do, sit on the beach and watch it happen? It was just normal.”


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Devastated: Lifeguard Chanan Clark next to the body of a 63-year-old man who died in the tragedy and (below) the scene at the beach.



Heroes: Youngsters Isaac Ridley (left) and April Boughton, and (below) paramedics work on patients after they were plucked from the sea.

