

# Surf veterans make waves

By LOUISA WALES

**When a special group of Swanbourne-Nedlands Surf Life Saving Club members get together, the average age of people in the room rises to more than 80.**

“Can we have a show of hands for new knees in the room?” said the oldest member of the group, 88-year-old Wallace Wegner.

The 12 veteran members of the lifesaving club first joined as children and young teenagers in the post-war 1940s and 50s.

“Our parents wanted to get rid of us and sent us all down to the beach,” said the veterans’ youngest member, 75-year-old Bob Milne.

Being in the surf club was “the in thing”, 84-year-old Chippy Greenhill said.

“In those days there was nothing else to do.”

For Peter Butterworth, 81, the first attraction was the beach.

“But we soon noticed the surf club looked fun,” he said.

The discipline and camaraderie of being in the club soon had the boys hooked.

“It was the best thing I ever did,” said veteran Pete Brown.

Drills for the belt and reel – a system for rescuing troubled swimmers and reeling them in – were gruelling but made for fit young men.

“We turned into very fit youngsters, and it’s carried on through life,” 80-year-old Garry Fletcher said.

Unlike today’s speedy motorised rubber duckie surf rescue boats, the surf boat in the 40s and 50s was a hefty wooden whaleboat.



**POST PEOPLE**

*Veterans Bob Milne and Peter Butterworth are two of the dozen Swanbourne-Nedlands Surf Life Saving Club members in their 70s and 80s. ABOVE: Bronze Medallion*

“At the start of the summer we had to fill her with water for a week to make the planks swell,” Mr Oldfield said.

“It was unbelievably heavy to manoeuvre.”

Hair-raising tales abound through the many decades of club-life the veterans have shared.

“I nearly drowned when the line jammed on the belt and reel and dragged me into the water and held me there,” 78-year-old Kevin McPhail said.

Bob Milne recalled a spine-chilling encounter with a “Noah’s Ark” – club slang for a shark.

“We had 40 of us swimming in a line parallel to the shore between two buoys, doing 800m,” he said.

“The fellow on lookout noticed a big shark cruising between us and the shore.

“He had to decide whether to hit the siren which would have us all swimming back to shore – and towards the shark.”

With steely nerves, the lookout opted not to set off the shark alarm and watched with bated breath as it cruised on by.

“We were out there none the wiser until we came in and he told us,” Mr Milne said.

In the 1950s, a friendly seal, known as Scarborough Bill, would follow the swimmers – popping up behind them to give them a fright.

“It made us all better and faster swimmers,” Chippy Greenfield quipped.

Many of the veterans met their future wives at the club.

“There were a few lady members, but not enough to go around,” Mr Greenfield said.

Girls and women took part in separate carnivals

from the boys and men and were not allowed to do their Bronze Medallion.

“Things have changed on that front, I’m pleased to say,” Mr Butterworth said.

“Membership these days is around 50:50 female and male and the young women are holding their own.”

For the veterans, being part of the club has been a source of camaraderie and good health in their long lives.

“It’s a fabulous club and we’re happy at this age we can still be part of it,” Mr Fletcher said.

The veterans meet at 11am on the second Tuesday of each month at the lifesaving club for a sausage sizzle and a catch-up.

“We’d welcome new members, if any former club members want to join us,” Mr Fletcher said.