A long and happy marriage

By Brett Williamson, CEO Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA)

Australia’s surf lifesavers have been watching over the country’s beaches for one hundred years and in that time have rescued more than 520,000 people. As one of the country’s largest volunteer organisations, we depend heavily upon support from the corporate sector to provide everything from basic rescue gear and first aid equipment to organisational development programs.

We are delighted that Westpac has expanded its existing relationship with Surf Life Saving to become a major corporate partner nationally. There is a strong connection between our two organisations. Both have a long heritage and community focus underpinned by Australian values such as trust, honesty, health and family.

The relationship between Westpac and Surf Life Saving in Australia is the most durable in the history of surf lifesaving. It began in Sydney in 1973, with the sponsorship of the nation’s first rescue helicopter service, by the then Bank of New South Wales. This relationship with rescue services then extended to Surf Life Saving Queensland in 1976.

Since then, it has grown to include support of Life Saver Rescue helicopter services operated by SLSA’s subsidiaries in Sydney and Lismore - collectively operating under the Westpac Life Saver Rescue Helicopter name, as well as similar services in Queensland and South Australia, fixed-wing aircraft in Victoria and the latest rescue equipment in Tasmania. I also know that Westpac supports the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Service in the Hunter and New England regions of NSW and a rescue helicopter through the Tasmanian Air Rescue Trust. The most recent evolution of this relationship will see Westpac at the heart of our Surf Life Saving organisation.

As major sponsor of the Year of the Surf Lifesaver in 2007, Westpac is involved in commemorating the rich history of surf lifesaving in Australia. Westpac is also contributing to the development of the next generation of surf lifesavers with their sponsorship of our state junior Surf Life Saving Championships.

I know I speak on behalf of the entire surf lifesaving movement when I say that we’re looking forward to continuing to work closely with Westpac to achieve mutual goals and I applaud the company for its commitment to saving lives.
“In Westpac we have found a truly unique corporate partner. Not only are they prepared to commit in a financial capacity but their employees’ commitment to community involvement is commendable.”
All in a night’s work

As Peter Donahue plunged into drawing darkness and a ruthless rip to save two lives one night on Sydney’s Maroubra beach, NSW, the furthest thing from his mind was being rewarded for bravery.

The beach was closed, the council lifeguard had long gone and Peter was the only surf lifesaver on the beach. It was 8.15pm on a January evening and Peter was checking out the surf when two young men in their early twenties, fresh from soccer training, dashed down the beach and dived into the sea.

Watching from further up the beach, Peter was concerned about where they’d entered the water, and the fading light. As he watched, a wave surged over a sandbank and into a gully dragging the two men out with it.

Seeing that the two men were in trouble and that the sun was fading fast, Peter sprinted down the beach to the surf club for a rescue board. Plunging into the water Peter caught the fast-moving rip out towards the two men. Swimming against the rip they were fast losing their strength and time was of the essence.

The further out the larger the surf became. Peter was knocked from his board, which was picked up by a wave and swept back to shore. In the failing light he swam back to retrieve the board and co-opted a board rider to come back out with him to assist.

He is one of many Westpac employees who support the surf lifesaving movement.

As Peter paddled back through the surf it was as if someone had drawn a curtain across the sun – all light had practically gone. It was this darkness, Peter realised, that was the gravest danger for the two men.

By now the rip had carried them much further out and it took Peter some time to locate them. It was 9pm when he eventually towed the two exhausted men back to shore and safety.

Peter, a Westpac employee and a surf lifesaver for seven years, has been awarded a meritorious award for bravery by Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) for this rescue. He is one of many Westpac employees who support the surf lifesaving movement and he takes a particularly active involvement in SLSA’s nippers program. Making the most of Westpac’s flexibility for community involvement he comes in and leaves work early every Tuesday and Thursday during the summer to help out with nippers.

In his view, Westpac allowing him, and others like him, to take the time to participate in activities such as nippers is as, if not more, important than the financial support Westpac gives to Surf Life Saving. Peter feels he can prevent incidents like that night at Maroubra by helping to educate the next generation of beach-goers.

When it began

Swimming in the surf during daylight hours was illegal in the 1800s.

In the early 1900s, the laws were gradually changed and in response to the growing popularity of surf bathing, Australia’s first surf life saving clubs – the first in the world – were formed in Sydney’s eastern suburbs.

As the popularity of surf bathing continued to increase, so did the dangers and loss of life. On 6 February 1938 at Bondi Beach, “Black Sunday” resulted in 250 bathers requiring assistance and five people died.

On 18 October 1907, representatives of the seven first surf clubs, along with other interested groups, met to form the Surf Bathing Association of NSW, which went on to become Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA).

Today across Australia many beaches are patrolled by Surf Life Saving Australia, with up to 37,000 active surf lifesavers, state-of-the-art equipment and world class training.

Making a difference

More than 520,000 people have been rescued by Australia’s lifesavers since 1907.
Little Nippers

Every year over 42,000 children, ranging from 7 to 13 years become ‘nippers’ at one of the 305 surf life saving clubs.

Surf lifesaving junior activities have become one of the most respected children's development programs in Australia. Westpac has commenced a new sponsorship of the Junior (“nippers”) Surf Life Saving Championships in each state. There is a strong link between Westpac’s belief that every generation should live better than the last and Surf’s nipper program. It is a perfect vehicle for Westpac to demonstrate grass-roots community support by encouraging a healthy lifestyle and helping to train tomorrow’s heroes.

SLSA’s statistics show that people who live 50 kilometres or more from the coast are over-represented in coastal drowning statistics compared to those who live near the coast. To help raise surf safety awareness among children, between the ages of 8 and 12, Westpac provided support through a Bush Nippers competition in January 2007.

Four lucky winners from across Australia participated in a three-day Surf Training Camp at Coogee Surf Life Saving Club in Sydney, NSW. They became Westpac Bush Nippers and honorary Coogee Club Surf Nippers and went back home as champions for surf safety to spread the word amongst their friends. Westpac-sponsored Olympic swimmer, Grant Hackett, also made a special appearance at the camp.

Nipper Notes: hand-written entry note from a Bush Nipper.
Risking it all

An account by Tony Woods, Chief Crewman, Southern Region

“I've been flying at the Sydney Westpac Life Saver Rescue Helicopter base for 19 years, a fairly long time. I've done thousands of hours of flight time and I've got hundreds of missions I could talk about, but there's a couple I do keep in mind and will never forget. One was a night mission at a place called Coffin Rock. It was probably the most dangerous rescue I've ever done. Night missions are always the most treacherous. They have the potential for so much to go wrong.

That night, just to the south of Botany Bay in Sydney, four fishermen were caught by the tide at Coffin Rock. We were pushed against time as the waves were getting bigger and the tide was coming in fast. It was dark as we flew perilously close to where the waves were crashing against the cliff face. With the sea foaming around us and washing over the railings we winched the fishermen out as fast as we could. Without a doubt, if the helicopter hadn't been there that night those fishermen would have perished.

The other was during the day at Cronulla Beach in Sydney. Two water rescues were called during 50-60 knot gusting winds – it was horrific, we were thrown about all over the place in the turbulent conditions. We checked the first rescue, four surfers who were ok; we then came back around for the second rescue, all this time being jostled about by strengthening winds. There was a young surfer being washed out; by this stage the seas were about 3-4 metres and the winds were out of control. Looking back, trying to keep a hover overhead in these conditions was extremely difficult and dangerous. I certainly think we were lucky to get away with that one.”