

## THE AUTHOR



Edward Wake-Walker worked for 28 years with the RNLI, the final 16 as PR Director. The son of a Royal Navy officer, he spent time teaching in Africa, studying in France and working aboard luxury yachts in the Mediterranean before joining the RNLI. He has travelled extensively throughout the UK and Ireland, meeting and writing about many of the most well-known lifeboat coxswains. He has also visited a number of other countries including Holland, France, Norway, Germany, Spain, the USA, Uruguay and Chile to study how they organise their sea rescue services. He has published two books with an RNLI flavour - Gold Medal Rescues (David and Charles) in 1992 and Lost Photographs of the RNLI (Sutton) in 2004. Now a full-time writer, he lives with his wife and two teenage children on the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset.

*Above*  
The author at Avalon beach with an IRB model made by Warren Mitchell.

*Cover photo*  
A modern IRB crew from Avalon Beach, New South Wales, confront the surf. Avalon was the first surf life saving club to test an inflatable for rescue purposes.

# BREAK THROUGH

BY EDWARD WAKE-WALKER

This is the intriguing story of how the Australian surf came to be conquered by the seemingly puny 12ft inflatable rescue boat, the rubber ducky as it came to be known. It is now the single most important means of rescuing people from the surf, not just in Australia but in many countries across the world.

The story originates in the early 1960s when a young Australian, Warren Mitchell, working as a lifeguard on a north Cornish beach, witnessed early trials of inflatable rescue boats (which led to the RNLI adopting them into their fleet). He took the concept back to New South Wales and, in the face of enormous scepticism, proved to his countrymen that the IRB was a quicker, safer alternative to all the traditional methods used to get to people drowning 'beyond the break'.

There are accounts of recent daring rescues in mountainous surf as well as a look back over the centuries at how sea bathing and surfing first became popular and at the 900 BC origins of the inflatable boat.

*Break Through* has been produced as a joint venture between the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Surf Life Saving Australia. Its publication in 2007 helps to mark the centenary of SLSA, 'the Year of the Surf Lifesaver'. The two volunteer organisations nowadays work closely together exchanging personnel, ideas and techniques and they see the IRB story as inspiration for such international co-operation. All proceeds from the sale of this book will benefit the two organisations' lifesaving work.

*'When the draft manuscript came up on the screen my intention was to do no more than glance at it, then print it before reading. But it got to me, I read almost all of it on the screen!'*

*It is well written, entertaining and never slows down because of excessive detail.*

*What I particularly like about the book is its breadth of history – British, Australian, Australian states, New Zealand, RNLI, etc. There's nothing 'parochial' about it, and the various strands of the story are woven together very skilfully. A great piece of writing.'*

Professor Ed Jaggard of Edith Cowan University, Perth,  
official historian for Surf Life Saving Australia.

## HOW THE INFLATABLE RESCUE BOAT CONQUERED THE SURF

BREAK THROUGH EDWARD WAKE-WALKER



EDWARD WAKE-WALKER  
BREAK THROUGH

AVALON BEACH,  
NEW SOUTH WALES,  
DECEMBER 1969.

"What are they doing with that rubber ducky?" someone asks. "Don't tell me they are going to try to get that out through the break. There's going to be even more people who need rescuing in a moment!"

The inflatable boat is now in the water and, while one man stands at the bow, holding the head down and pointing seawards in the shorebreak, another leaps aboard at the stern and pulls the outboard starter cord. The engine roars into life, the man at the bow drags himself on board and scarcely before he or his helmsman have gained their positions, perched fore and aft on the inflated sponsons, the boat hits an approaching wall of broken water. The bow shoots skywards. The man in the bow is catapulted high into the air and, as time stands still, seems to hang there, silhouetted against the sky, before he and the bow descend back to an even keel, the crewman bouncing spectacularly on the sponson as contact is regained.

That was just the shorebreak. "How the hell," onlookers ask each other, "are they going to cope with the real stuff further out?"

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