

Dwight Crum 1922 - 2000

The Passing of a Legend

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Contributions by Dick Douglas, Los Angeles County Lifeguard and Michael Macdonald of the Easy Reader

He was a lifeguard's lifeguard. If you were to have met Dwight Crum, your instant reaction would be, he is a nice, quiet person. He was not the type of individual who demanded attention nor did he ask anything of anyone that he would not do himself. Dwight had that Gary Cooper quality, quiet, committed to a cause, and got the job done. Many individuals in Dwight's era were boisterous, gregarious, and held to a different standard.

In 1941, Dwight was hired as a recurrent lifeguard for Los Angeles County. He was a young man who loved the ocean. "Times were different then", Dwight once said. Lifeguarding was not regarded as a 'safety profession.' "Men like Rusty Williams and Bud Stevenson, (both former chief lifeguards) insisted we act like professionals." This made an impression on Dwight, who was the consummate professional throughout his career.

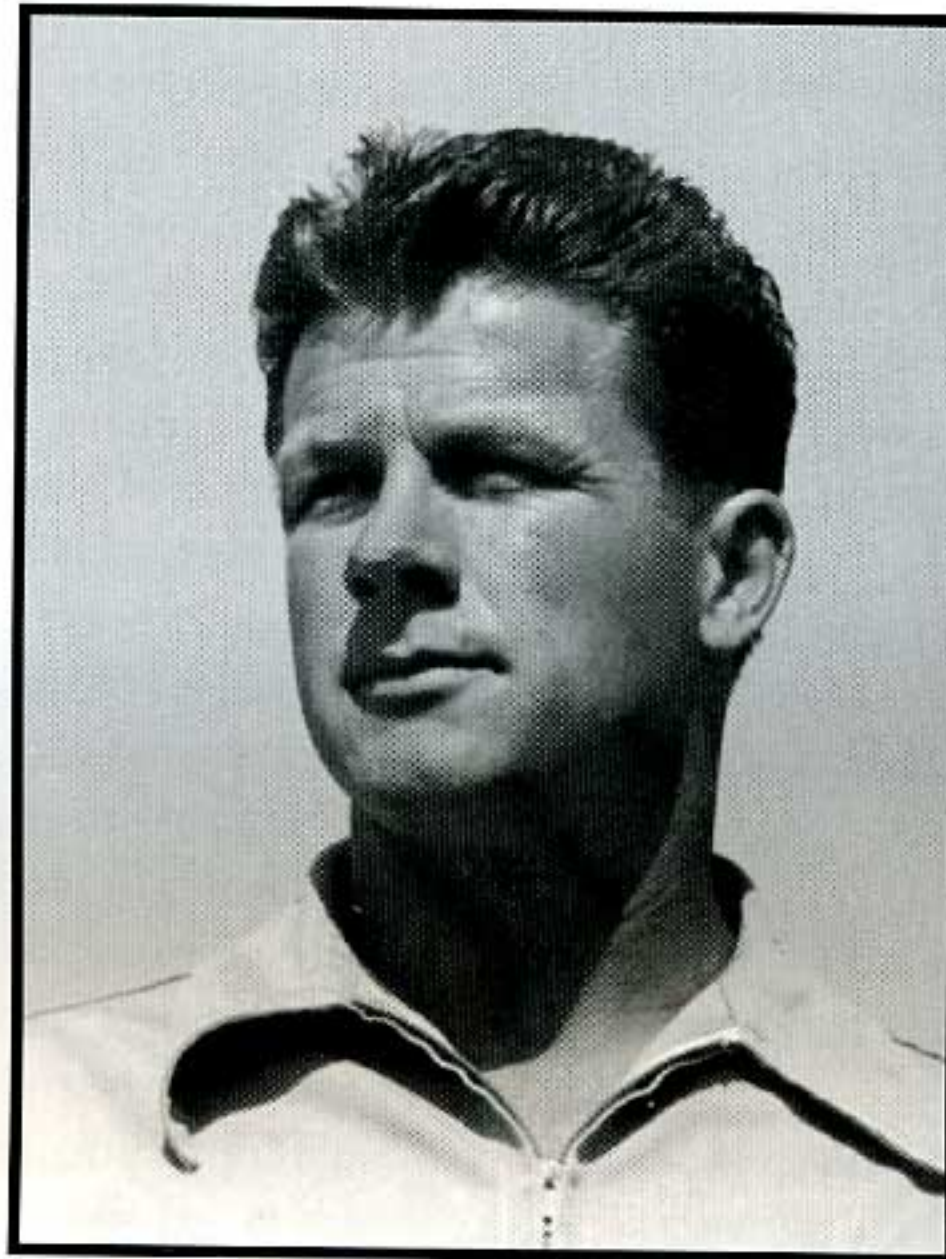
Dwight grew up in Compton, California. He used to take the streetcars to Long Beach before the Federal breakwater was constructed where he enjoyed surf similar to the Huntington Beach type break. "I learned how to swim in the surf by watching other people," Dwight said. He went to the University of Southern California and graduated with a degree in Business Administration. He served in the Navy during World War II as a Lieutenant on a minesweeper as a deck officer, clearing the way for invasion fleets from New Guinea to the Philippines. "We were at the Battle of Leyte Gulf," Dwight said. "Then at Zamboanga, on Mindanao Island, we hit a mine and our ship was destroyed." Dwight was then assigned to Long Beach after that, and worked as a lifeguard in Hermosa Beach on his days off. He married his lovely wife Ginny in 1946. When the war ended in 1947 he was appointed permanent lifeguard. Dwight was promoted to lieutenant in 1952 and then captain in

1954. During an interview for an article in the Easy Reader, Dwight said, "We started at \$5.60 a day, so all guards with families had to have second jobs back then." Dwight resorted to skin diving to add to the family income. Lobsters and abalone were a popular item back then, "There was a Japanese nursery who would give us 50 cents apiece," he said. SCUBA was later invented and put an end to this source of revenue. For many years, Dwight was a respected water polo and swimming referee.

Dwight served the Los Angeles County Lifeguards for 35 years. He was known as Captain Crum for 18 of those years. During his rein as Captain, he was involved as one of the founders and served as Vice President of the National

Surf Lifesaving Association (now known as the United States Lifesaving Association).

Los Angeles County Lifeguards were in the Parks and Recreation Department until 1969. In 1969, with help from the Board of Supervisors and a lot of hard work from the core lifeguards, the Department of Beaches was formed. Dwight was asked to hang up his red trunks and put on a tie. This new department of lifeguards for lifeguards had to work if Dwight's convictions were to succeed. Dwight reluctantly accepted the Assistant Director position and served in that capacity for four years until he retired in 1974. Dwight's degree in business administration, extensive experience in the field, and respect from the politicians, local communities, peers, and subordinates played a key roll during his administrative tenure. He was the quiet leader and he carried his message to the people who controlled the purse strings. This helped lifeguards. If lifeguards have support, then the public can be served. Although Dwight did not feel as comfortable in his role as an administrator, going to meeting after meeting, his sacrifice from what he loved, "Making rescues," allowed the lifeguards to receive and carry his baton to the next generation.





Crossed oars and L.A. County's lifeguard emblem in flowers, the Taplan Bell, and Dwight in Lifeguard uniform.

Michael Macdonald's article in August 1994 titled, "The Beach Captain" said it all. Dwight felt the most comfortable as the Captain of the Southern Section. He was in the position of having input in the decision making process, but most importantly he could still make rescues. "I remember working a riptide in Manhattan Beach, being dog tired, then turning to find Captain Crum right beside me," said recurrent lifeguard Dick Douglas. "He had been in the water making rescues." "There are still people, who refer to Dwight as Captain Crum," said his wife of 53 years Ginny Crum. "Sometimes I still think of him as Captain Crum," Douglas said, "even though Dwight has been a friend for many years." "I don't have to look very far for a role model," said his son, Section Chief Gary Crum. "My dad was always there to make a rescue. He said "the most important component of lifesaving is a well-trained guard with a (rescue) can." Gary has continued Dwight's legacy as Section Chief of the Southern Section. Reminding Gary of Dwight's love for the beach and making rescues when exiting the water himself after a rescue, "My dad (Dwight) was my best friend.....this one was for you Pop," Gary said with his can strap still across his chest. It was



Units from Lifeguard Agencies up and down the coast lined up on both sides of Avenue C in Redondo Beach to memorialize Dwight.

a tribute to his father for the fundamental principle of not believing that you are too good or important not to wear the red trunks and make the rescue. Like father, like son.

During a presentation ceremony where he received Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to Lifesaving, Dwight reflected. "There is a camaraderie among guards that stems from the love of the ocean. I have never been around a finer group of people." Ginny Crum adds, "When we're at San Onofre surfing, we're all just friends from the youngest guard to those who have retired. There is something special about being a lifeguard." Upon receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award, Dwight, somewhat embarrassed to be recognized for what he believed in and felt he was just one of many others who felt the same, said "Thanks."

Dwight served as Chairman of the International Surf Festival for 16 years. He was instrumental creating the Surf Festival. He felt that the community should have an opportunity to see what lifeguards did and the skills that they possess. The events were showcased at night under the lights. They expanded into many events that included everyone. He was also responsible for creating the international exchange with lifeguards from Australia. "Dwight wasn't real good at delegating responsibility," Ginny Crum remembered. "During those years, he ordered the lights and grandstands, organized the competitors, he did just about everything." He also was the announcer until he lost his voice and turned it over to another lifeguard. His love for swimming led to his swimming the Hermosa Beach Pier to Manhattan Beach Pier 2-mile swim race. He held the Pacific Coast Conference in the 440 yard freestyle in 1942 and continued swimming in the ocean. "I used to like swimming in the pier to pier race during the festivals, because for a little while I didn't have to answer any questions or the telephone," Dwight said. The swim was later named after Dwight in his honor. His last race was at 72 years of age. Dwight swam a mile a day until he suffered a stroke in 1999.

During a particularly hot spring day in the early 1960s, Captain Crum's Southern Section made 1,056 swimming rescues. That one day total was quite impressive, a record that is one of the highest totals for a one-day period ever recorded in the Southern Section. When interviewed, Dwight was quoted as saying, "We were pretty busy that day," another example of his quiet understatement. Dwight also did not mention that he was in the water contributing to the total of lives saved. Dwight reflected on a rescue that he had on another occasion. He hit the water in a

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rip current and the rescue escalated into seven persons in need of help. "I managed to talk the people down and got them in after a few minutes of hard swimming." This story lead to Dwight's analyses of lifeguarding techniques. "The most important factor is having people who are good swimmers. A good ocean swimmer with a (rescue) can and a pair of binoculars is the foundation of our service," Dwight said. "You take one fast swimmer, you train him/her with the most experienced guards, then you send him/her to a hot area and let them make rescues. You don't become a real lifeguard until you almost lose somebody. Then it all becomes very clear what we do," added Dwight. A story related at Dwight's Memorial Service by our now President of the United States Lifesaving Association, Don Rohrer, "I asked Dwight if I could borrow a rescue can to use at our Los Angeles City beaches (different agency in the 1950's and 1960's that included some rivalry) or even pay for it. We had the lifeguards, but not enough equipment. Dwight gave me the can and said you are going to save lives with it, keep it," Rohrer said. One of Dwight's proudest records was ten years on some of the world's busiest beaches without a drowning.

"He seldom got mad," Dick Douglas said, "but you didn't want to disappoint him." "Dwight led by example, whether it was a surf rescue, an accident, or a cliff call, you could expect to have Captain Crum

next to you. He was the epitome of hands on. It kept him young and in-touch." He served as a model for many up and coming lifeguards. These up and coming lifeguards are now the leaders of the organization and instrumental in making the profession what it is today.

March 6, 2000, many lifeguards and friends from up and down the coast paid their respects to Dwight and his family at Avenue C in Redondo Beach. Speakers said, "We will miss the infamous pause on the telephone, standing on the beach side-by-side with the Captain, and the fact that he was very special and has the tremendous respect of everyone he has ever worked with or considered him a friend." He cared for his family, friends, profession, and his community. He was a man's man. He loved his family, friends, traveling, the beach, and most of all – He loved being a lifeguard.

The family would like to thank members of the California Surf Lifesaving Association who attended in uniform, with vehicles, and boats. His service was a celebration of what lifesaving has become. Dwight started out with a metal rescue can and a bicycle. Your presence had a strong impact on the family and they will be eternally grateful.

Dwight, you will be missed, but your spirit lives within us. We thank you. Lifesaving thanks you. The public thanks you.