

## Transcript Part 1 of 6

### 'The Sudden Storm: The AANS sisters of Singapore + Radji Beach'

#### Episode 02 of the Schools Program podcast series for the

#### Virtual War Memorial Australia

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PLEASE NOTE THAT THE SECTION REFERRING TO 'SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN WAR' IS MARKED IN YELLOW IN THE TRANSCRIPT BELOW (PAGES 7 & 8).

#### Part 01 (duration: 28:40)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Welcome to this podcast presented by the Virtual War Memorial Australia, Australia's largest online national memorial honouring all those who've served the nation in times of war and conflict, peacekeeping and peacemaking, and their families and communities.*

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*The Virtual War Memorial Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands on which we commemorate and honour Australian service people. And we pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.*

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*We also extend that respect to the traditional custodians of the land where you may be listening from today as well as any First Nations people listening.*

*This program contains concepts related to war and some depictions of war and its aftermath.*

*It also includes references to sexual violence in war. If you'd like to skip this content, please check the Show Notes that go with this episode, for exact timestamps.*

*Hello, my name is Megan Spencer and I make podcasts about wartime remembrance and the impact of war and military service. This podcast is produced by the Virtual War Memorial Australia for its Schools Education Program. And this episode is titled, 'The Sudden Storm'.*

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[OPENING MONTAGE OF VOICES]:

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I think I was shocked that I had not heard it growing up. I hadn't learnt it at school. So my response was quite visceral. I was shocked to learn that there'd been such a, a large number of women killed in a massacre during wartime. I was, yeah --- I was really speechless when I when I learnt that for the first time.

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MATTHEW SLOAN: The one thing that stands out for me is the fact that the nurses at the time as well as the the soldiers --- their only hope was to surrender to the Japanese --- so, you know, to basically surrender and then be executed... Um, yeah, I guess the legacy for me is, yeah certainly the fact that they're still being remembered 80 years later.

HELEN FISCHER: You know, it's a brutal story. They'd just heard the men shot and bayoneted. They knew what was coming. And then they walk into the sea arm---in---arm and their Matron says, "Chin up, girls, I'm proud of you. And I love you all".

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *In 1942 on a remote, tiny beach on Banka Island near Sumatra, a shocking incident occurred, shocking even in the context of the terrible world war that was going on at the time.*

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*It wasn't until around 3 years later that 21 Australian families found out what had happened to their daughters and their sisters.*

JOHN DAVIDSON: And ah, I think what really resonated to me at the end was the words of the major who said, "Chin up girls. I love you all. I'm very proud of you". So, very moving.

ANDY PRIESTNER: Um, I think the thing that strikes me most of all is the unbreakable bond that existed between all these women because of the experience they had together. And the fact that through adversity they formed a sisterhood. And that was something that also gave them a unity, a community, a purpose -- liberation to express themselves as women --- in a time, in the '40s, when this was not so acceptable!

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IAN SHAW: I think the legacy is the story of: young women who put something bigger ahead of themselves.

JILLIAN DAVIDSON: Their incredible bravery to, to just hold up through all of it! The sinking of the boat, the camaraderie --

MEGAN SPENCER: The women?

JILLIAN DAVIDSON: --- The women --- of being put in that situation. But atrocities were everywhere and on every side. And I think that has to be acknowledged that it was part of war. And war is just overwhelmingly bad.

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Oh --- it's definitely a women's story. And I guess that's why it's, you know, it's worth keeping promoting it, because it *is* a women's story.

MEGAN SPENCER: *What happened on Radji Beach was a massacre that ranks as one of the bloodiest war crimes of World War Two involving Australians, a tragedy that is still remembered today, eighty years later....*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] LTCOL KARL HAAS (Retd): *Please stand for the marching on of the Catafalque Party. The Catafalque Party is made up of serving Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps officers from 3rd Health Battalion and commanded by Major Matthew Stevens. [AUDIO Drum beats].*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *That's the sound of a catafalque party. Historically it's an official armed military guard made up of four people who stand watch over the raised coffin of a distinguished person, or around memorials on occasions of remembrance.*

*When they come to a halt, they stand outwards with their heads bowed, their weapons reversed, as a symbolic form of respect for those who've fallen. Solemn and moving to witness, catafalque parties are part of military ceremonies which honour the dead, and are reserved for special occasions like this one...*

*And the catafalque party you can hear right now is made up of four nurses from the Australian Army Nursing Service. Its members are honouring those who were lost in the Bangka Island Massacre which took place in Indonesia on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, 1942, during World War Two.*

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*Today's ceremony marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And this is the voice of the event's MC, Lieutenant Colonel Karl Haas, retired.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] LTCOL Karl Haas (Retd): *Please be seated.*

MEGAN SPENCER: *It's a warm, sunny Sunday morning in February 2022 and we're at the Women's Memorial Playing Fields in St. Mary's, Adelaide, on the side of a big grassy green sports oval.*

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*There are several hundred people here at the Playing Fields: from the elders and traditional owners of this land, Kurna country, dignitaries like the Governor General, state Governor and Premier of South Australia, to the families and relatives of the 21 nurses who died so horrifically on Bangka Island on that fateful day in February 1942, serving their country, 80 years ago.*

*The incident was part of a story that began with the Japanese occupation of Singapore a few days earlier, and the hurried, chaotic evacuation of nurses and civilians.*

*Today, Helen Fischer, President of the South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust, is retelling that story, of a small, overcrowded ship fleeing an oncoming invasion.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *On the evening of 12th of February 1942, Vyner Brooke was one of the last ships to leave Singapore carrying evacuees. Although she usually only carried 12 passengers and 47 crew, the Vyner Brooke sailed south with 181 passengers, most of them women and children. Among those passengers were the last 65 nurses to leave Singapore.*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *At that time, Singapore was in the process of falling to the Japanese – something that the war strategists and planners had failed to take very seriously or even believe was possible. The 65 nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service who piled aboard that terrifyingly crowded little ship, also hadn't foreseen this when they set off to Malaya and Singapore a year earlier to do their part for the war effort.*

*In February 1941, converted troop ship, the Queen Mary, left Pyrmont Dock in Sydney to a gala farewell. Almost 6000 Australian soldiers of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Imperial Force, were off to war.*

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[ARCHIVAL AUDIO]: *"There's purpose in their step and power in the swing of their arms. A river of men and they're headed for the sea".*

*And with them went 51 nurses. They were from the "AANS", the Australian Army Nursing Service, posted to the 2/10<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital and to the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing station, medical units attached to the 8<sup>th</sup> Division.*

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*And although they didn't quite know it, they were headed to Singapore.*

*A few months later, another 44 nurses followed with the 2/13<sup>th</sup> Australian General Hospital, sailing in September 1941.*

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*It was a pivotal moment in the ongoing world war. The threat of Japanese invasion was growing as they steadily moved south with clear intentions to take British colonial holdings in South East Asia. And if these fell the thinking was Australia would be unprotected.*

*The British Government's 'Singapore Strategy' was an out-dated naval defence policy designed to protect South East Asia and Australia from any threat of Japanese invasion. It relied on British warships being based to our north at the so-called 'impregnable' port of Singapore.*

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*But over the course of 1941, things were not going well for the Allies in the Northern hemisphere. They had their 'backs against the wall' fighting the German and Italian armies in the North Africa and Greece campaigns.*

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*Despite earlier assurances, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill buckled on sending further resources or warships of consequence, to fortify Singapore. The war in Europe was the priority for Britain.*

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*But the writing was on the wall... Although the real move to bring home Australian troops from the Middle East didn't come until December 1941, at intervals across that year, Australian troops were still being sent to the looming theatre of operations in the so-called 'Far East'.*

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*The Australian Army Nursing Service sisters heading to overseas service came from all walks of life – from the cities and from the bush. They were in their twenties and thirties, single, and career-minded young women, proud to be given the opportunity to actively do their part in the war effort and excited at the prospect of travel.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I think it was an adventure for women who had never been outside of Australia to be going to another part of the world --- a tropical part of the world --- and mixing with soldiers from all different walks of life and the friendship groups that they had among the nurses. The reports coming home, we're have a very interesting time in an expatriate community in another country. Yeah, being exposed to new cultures, new experiences --- all the things that you might associate with a first trip overseas.

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MEGAN SPENCER: *Christina Twomey is Professor of History at Monash University with a particular interest in gender and war, the experiences of Australian women in war, wartime imprisonment and internment. She's also been researching the story of the Bangka Island nurses for many years.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Even though they're working and they're on duty, they do have exposure to this whole other culture. And as you know, Malaya had Indian culture and Chinese culture and Malayan culture --- so many different ethnicities that they had often not come across before.

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MEGAN SPENCER: *The initial postings were in Malacca and Port Dickson on the Malay Peninsula, now called Malaysia. The nurses participated in an exotic colonial lifestyle with regular leave, while their work mainly consisted of dealing with tropical fevers and diseases, some surgical theatre work and accidents, as the soldiers trained nearby.*

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*In spite of the fact that Singapore was armed to the teeth and the centrepiece of Britain's strategy against Japanese aggression, for the nurses, that first part of their Army service was almost a 'luxury getaway'. As well as working, they went to dances, had drinks at Raffles Hotel and saw the sights.*

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*Here's Professor Christina Twomey again.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: So, it's inescapable that Malaya at the time was still a British colony and the Australian nurses are there as part of the Australian Army. And the command of that army rests with the British and so they replicate the patterns of a colonial society.

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So, they do have servants and they do attend racially exclusive clubs. And they do have wealth that is beyond the experience of the ordinary people in Malaya and Singapore. And they are able to access a lifestyle that would probably be beyond them in Australia --- even while they're serving in the military. So that's definitely part of the dynamic.

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And the Japanese certainly pitch their campaign as being getting rid of European colonialism from Asia and having 'Asia for the Asians', and establishing their own empire that is about getting rid of white colonials from the region.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Still, the threat of war remained at a bit of a distance.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Well when the nurses were first sent to Malaya, there was no real fear that the Japanese were going to invade --- like that situation went very pear-shaped very, very quickly. So I don't think there that there was a fear that they would be caught up in anything.

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MEGAN SPENCER: *But towards the end of 1941 and in early 1942 all that changed. Having been underestimated by the British, the forces of the Imperial Japanese Army were moving very quickly down the Malay Peninsula. As the front moved, so did the nurses.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: The nurses themselves wanted to stay. So they had a highly developed professional identity as nurses. They had a highly developed sense of responsibility to the men that were caring for and they really didn't want to leave.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Eventually they were all relocated to Singapore, where they very quickly found themselves in the middle of a war, with bombs falling all around them and wounded and dying men flooding into the makeshift hospitals, needing their expert care.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Then, of course, as we all know, they were. And retreat down the peninsula of Malaya and onto Singapore, was very rapid.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Singapore was the end of the line. As the situation became more desperate --- and the Imperial Japanese Army moved ever closer --- there was a call for the nurses to be returned to Australia.*

**[TIMESTAMP 18:28 – 18:40]** *Rumours were rife about Japanese soldiers attacking medical facilities in Hong Kong and other places as they moved southwards, raping and killing staff indiscriminately. [END TIMESTAMP]*

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*However, the head of the Australian force in Singapore, Major General Gordon Bennett, refused to evacuate the nurses, saying they were needed to keep up the morale of the troops. And the nurses themselves --- now seriously embroiled in the horrors of dealing with the wounded and dying --- also resisted leaving.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: So, there's a question mark about should they have been evacuated earlier? But the nurses themselves didn't want to go. And in the end, of course, the call was made. But they were reluctant to leave, because they wanted to continue their duty.

That was their primary identity, was as a nurse. And it was a mark of honour for them that they could remain behind with "the boys" and tend to them and perform the work for which they'd been trained. So, there was absolute commitment to the cause of nursing wounded soldiers. So there was a reluctance to leave as well, because they felt that they were in effect abandoning their post.

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The end in Singapore came much more rapidly than anybody had anticipated. And once that was clear, the nurses were --- you know, they were put on boats in an attempt to get them out of there. One made it safely back to Australia as you know. The other, the Vyner Brooke, did not.

MEGAN SPENCER: *On the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> February 1942, 52 nurses boarded The SS Empire Star, a refitted cargo liner. The ship, used to carrying supplies and around 20 passengers, had more than 2000 on board as civilians and government officials fled Singapore. It was a terrifying trip to Batavia --- now Jakarta in Indonesia. They were chased and bombed by Japanese forces, with many casualties and burials at sea.*

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*But the Empire Star eventually made it back to Australia, docking at Fremantle and dubbed the "miracle ship", as Ian Shaw writes in his book, 'On Radji Beach'.*

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*The final group of 65 nurses were loaded aboard the smaller SS Vyner Brooke, a cargo steamship and sometime Royal Yacht of the then British Raj of Sarawak. Having been requisitioned by the Royal Navy, it was now crammed with nearly 200 evacuees, defence personnel and civilians -- many of whom women and children. It left Singapore on the evening of Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1942.*

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**[TIMESTAMP 21:37 – 22:21]** CHRISTINA TWOMEY: And, the irony about the people in charge in Singapore being fearful that the nurses from Australia may be subjected to an experience similar to the nurses in Hong Kong, is that, the battalion that was on Bangka Island was the same one that had perpetrated those crimes in Hong Kong.

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So, in a way, the Vyner Brooke was packed with the nurses and other civilians and sent off chugging straight into the path of the very battalion that had caused such damage in Hong Kong. **[END TIMESTAMP]**

MEGAN SPENCER: *As the Vyner Brooke left on that fateful voyage, the Singapore skyline was aflame, sirens were blaring and the Japanese air forces were closing in on the fleeing ships. Heading south towards Australia and sailing mostly at night, the small ship spent two days heading across the open waters of the Bangka Strait, looking for islands to hide behind and weaving wildly to evade the attacking Japanese planes.*

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*On the third day it wasn't so lucky.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *The Vyner Brooke was attacked by several Japanese aircraft. Despite evasive action, she was crippled by several bombs.*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *Can you imagine? The nurses whose last days in Singapore had been filled with the trauma of dealing with dead and dying men, were now fleeing on a boat with women and children and the elderly. The first bomb that hit killed many passengers with others bleeding profusely from shrapnel wounds. The surviving nurses who weren't injured themselves tried to treat and comfort those who were, and all the while the Vyner Brooke was sinking... fast.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *And within half an hour had rolled over and sunk bow first.*

MEGAN SPENCER: *Twelve Australian nurses were among the casualties. Those who had survived the bombs and the sinking set out for land, a desperate flotilla of people piling into the few remaining lifeboats, onto rafts or swimming alongside. A number of the nurses simply drifted away and were never seen again.*



[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *Approximately 150 survivors eventually made it ashore at Bangka Island. The island had already been occupied by the Japanese and most of the survivors were taken captive.*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *Bangka Island is east of Sumatra in Indonesia. The survivors who washed up onto the island, onto Radji Beach, were in shock, and many were severely injured. On the beach were also a number of British sailors whose ship had been sunk offshore in a separate incident. They all realised that surrender to the Japanese was inevitable. So the able-bodied members of the party set off for the coastal town of Muntok where they were interned by the Japanese.*

*Remaining on the beach were British servicemen and the 22 Australian nurses --- including their dedicated army matron, Irene Drummond – all staying behind to tend to those too injured to be moved. As they organised shelter and looked for water, they had no idea of the awful fate that awaited them the following morning.*

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[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *A party of Japanese troops arrived and shot and bayoneted the male survivors, and then forced the 22 Australian nurses to wade into the sea and shot them from behind.*

MEGAN SPENCER: *An elderly British female civilian who had remained on the beach with the nurse, was also with them in the water. Twenty-three women were shot on that beach that day, 22 of them Australian Army nurses.*

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[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *As we know one survived, and despite being incarcerated as prisoner-of-war, managed to maintain secrecy and live to tell the story of the massacre.*

MEGAN SPENCER: *That survivor was Australian Army nurse, Vivien Bullwinkel. And we'll hear more about her remarkable story later. Here's Helen Fischer again...*

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[INTERVIEW] HELEN FISCHER: *We hold a service every year to commemorate the Bangka Island massacre. But this year was particularly special because it was the 80th anniversary of the massacre. And also we were inaugurating a new memorial.*

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*Our aim is to spread this story as far and wide as we can. So, when you see so many people who --- some who come every year, and some you don't know --- you know that the story gets told when they go home. You know, that they spread it among people who haven't heard of the Bangka Island massacre.*

You can --- you can hear the voice of Irene Drummond on the beach, saying to them, "Chin up, girls, I'm proud of you. And I love you all." That is telling women that they have a very special place and that their history needs to be taught.

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So a very, very special occasion, yes.

MEGAN SPENCER: *This is a story of women in war. To say that it's a 'a tragic story' is an understatement. After it was found out --- at the time in 1945 --- Australia went into shock. It was a wartime story that punched a hole through the heart of the nation. It still does.*

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*It's also a story of gen, courage, endurance and grace under fire. From start to end, these were dedicated, professional medical and military women doing their duty in the service of their country during World War Two.*

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*So coming up we'll hear more about 'women in war' and about the extraordinary survival of Vivian Bullwinkel.*

*And in this podcast we'll also explore the lives and legacies of two of the women who died on Radji Beach.*

*We'll hear from their families and from those who work hard to keep their memories and stories alive, today.*

*End of Part 01 transcript. Please go to Part 02.*

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