

Transcript Part 2 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 5 - - - 9).

Part 02 (duration: 37:51)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *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.

MEGAN SPENCER: *The nurses who weren't on Radji Beach that fateful day --- those who had survived the sinking of the Vyner Brooke and floated ashore to other parts of Bangka Island --- were imprisoned by the Japanese and spent the next three--and--a--half years in prisoner--of--war camps.*

At the end of the war in August 1945, they were still missing. After searching for them for several weeks, in September 1945, the Allies eventually tracked them down to their last prison camp in the abandoned Belaulau rubber estate high in the mountains and deep jungle of south Sumatra, at Loeboek Linggau, near Lahat.

Out of the nurses who'd been taken prisoner, 8 had died in internment.

After being found, on or around the 16th of September, the nurses were flown to Singapore, ambulances waiting for them on the tarmac. As Ian Shaw writes in his book, 'On Radji Beach', their average weight was 30 kilograms.

After six years of war the Australian public well understood the horrors that the men faced in the frontlines. But they weren't ready for the sight of these emaciated women who'd lived through so much.

These were the brave young nurses who had sailed away so proudly to be part of the war effort. Somehow it was imagined that they would stay that way, smiling in their crisp uniforms, bringing comfort to injured men. But, this was war.

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Of the 65 women who had left Singapore on the Vyner Brooke, only 24 came home.

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I think it's significant because there aren't many other instances in our war history of women being so obviously and dangerously exposed to enemy fire in that way.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Historian, Professor Christina Twomey, who we heard from earlier, has researched the prisoner--of--war history of the Japanese including that of the Australian Army Nurses. She says theirs is a significant story that potentially challenges our ideas about what war is --- and who can be part of it.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: And the nurses were wearing red--cross armbands, clearly identified as medical staff. So, in any massacre of medical personnel that's a breach of the Geneva Conventions right there. So it's unusual in our history of World War Two.

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I think it's also significant because women are usually not considered the victims of war in quite the same way as men. And this puts women squarely in danger in the Pacific Theatre in ways that we don't often countenance.

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So, I think its significance lies both in how unusual it is, but also in how I think it's been largely forgotten?

We know a lot about some of the other massacres of POWs that occurred during World War Two. But the Bangka Island massacre --- it's known in military history circles, but I'm not sure that it's so well known among younger people. And that is shocking to me.

And I think it's partly because, the story of the POWs became the story of 'mateship', the story of 'Weary Dunlop and his care for the troops'. And this story about 'a group of women being murdered on a beach', it just doesn't really sit well in, in the way the POW story has been redeemed in Australian culture, as being one of 'mateship and survival'. Because this is about women and they all die.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Christina says that the way the returning women were presented to the press and the public was quite different to the images of the male prisoners--of--war.*

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: And the men were often photographed and depicted as they were discovered in loincloths and very emaciated, whereas the female nurse survivors of the camps --- they were also photographed --- and you could also see their emaciation, the people from Palembang. But they were all covered up for the camera in nightgowns and spotted cotton dresses, and their hair was done and makeup was put on. So there was much made of their return to a certain kind of femininity.

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Because I think what was happening was that 'women being taken prisoner by an enemy power' was a very problematic thing for people to understand in terms of the gendered nature of war? Because women 'are meant to be on the home front and men 'are at the front'.

And nurses kind of get around that by being in the caring professions in war. But when you have a nurse taken prisoner of war and put in a camp and subjected to very difficult conditions for a very long time, that really challenges people's understanding of 'a woman's place in war'.

So when those nurses are released and their experiences come to be reported upon, I think there's a real emphasis of returning them to 'a certain kind of femininity', and 're-feminising' them, in a way.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Yeah, in September 1945, when Matron-in-Chief of the Army Nurses, Colonel Annie Sage went to meet newly liberated women on the tarmac of Lahat airport... Expecting to meet the 65 nurses from the Vyner Brooke, reportedly she took 65 lipsticks with her for their journey back to Singapore. She was shocked to discover that only 24 out of the 65 women had survived the war, only recognisable from their uniforms which they had valiantly patched together. She said it was "one of the most moving experiences" of her life.*

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When they asked her who she was, she said: [ACTOR'S VOICE] "I am the mother of you all, Matron-in-Chief, Anne Sage".

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: Women in war is a problematic area, isn't it? And the Australian military has really wrestled with this. There have been women involved in overseas deployments since 1899.

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: If think if we're talking about the nurses in WWII --- the main thing you need to keep in mind about gender in war, is that the language of war has always been quite gendered in that "men are linked with the battlefield" and "women are linked with the home front".

And of course the realities of people's lives and are much more messy than that. But when women veer onto the battlefield --- in the way that the nurses were when they were on Bangka Island --- it challenges people's very cherished ideas about, "women should be protected from the worst horrors of war, they shouldn't be exposed to it".

That, this is a challenge to men's ability to protect women properly.

So there's a story about when the women were released from Palembang by then --- and they're taken back to Singapore on the plane. And they come off the plane and they're clearly emaciated, have been in a very bad way for a long time and they're really [in] poor condition...

When the soldiers who're in hospital in Singapore find out about the condition of the women, quite a few of them become almost hysterical, and have to be restrained in their beds. Because they want to jump out of their beds and take revenge on the people who had done this to them.

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And we might interpret it as 'hysteria' or 'overreaction', but I think it's also about 'shame'. They're ashamed that women who they 'ought' to have been protecting were so exposed and vulnerable and had been so damaged by war. So it's a really complicated series of emotions and feelings.

MEGAN SPENCER: *For the families of the 21 nurses who died on Radji Beach, the rescue and return of the nurses from their ordeal in the Japanese prison camps was the moment of truth, when they finally learned the tragic fate of their beloved daughters and sisters.*

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Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel was the only survivor of the women's beach massacre. She had been shot that day but the bullet had passed through her, missing vital organs. She had fallen unconscious into the ocean. Left for dead, she was eventually able to make her way to the town of Muntok on Bangka Island, where she was taken prisoner by the Japanese Army.

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She shared the story of what happened on Radji Beach with only a few of her fellow nurses in the camp. To ensure her survival it had been kept a well guarded secret.

Now, she had to face the Australian public and tell them what had happened.

Christina Twomey says that the reporting of the massacre today would be very different to that of 1945.

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: So when the nurses who survive the prison camp are first rescued from the island and put on a plane and taken to Singapore, they hold a press conference the minute they're released. That's astonishing! That really wouldn't be allowed to happen now, for example. They'd be whisked off, they'd be debriefed, they'd be allowed to recover a little bit.

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And what I think happens in 1945 --- or what I know happens in 1945 --- is the press never go and speak, really, to the families of the victims. There's just a 'silence' that descends around the women who have actually died and all of the attention is focused on Vivian Bullwinkel as the sole survivor.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Christina thinks that Vivian Bullwinkel had well prepared for that moment.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: And I think Vivian Bullwinkel adopts a very conscious strategy, about how she is going to talk about that experience because she wants to control the narrative of it.

But the nurses step off the plane. And Vivian Bullwinkel talks straight up about the massacre and says, "Everyone was brave, no one panicked, no one ran, they just walked towards the sea and were mowed down". So she's really controlling what people know about that massacre. And there's a respectful reluctance, I think, to really dig into what she's saying or look for alternative accounts of that event.

[TIMESTAMP 13:00 – 25:05] MEGAN SPENCER: *Perhaps predicting the next question from the media, Christina says that right off the bat the second thing the nurses say in their press conference, is that while 'pressure had been exerted on them by their Japanese military captors to work for them in a sexual way', the nurses said that they had resisted this – and that they had not been sexually assaulted or raped in the camps.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: The question of, "were there any rapes on the beach?" did not come up.

MEGAN SPENCER: *In other words, it's likely that before facing the media the nurses got their stories straight.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: But, with the story of the nurses, they mostly all stick to the same script. There's such a lack of deviation that I personally think that there must have been an agreement about what would be said.

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MEGAN SPENCER: Why do you think they decided to run it that way? Why do you think Vivian decided to take control of the narrative?

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: To protect themselves, and to protect their reputation and to prevent any prying questions. And to honour and protect the memory of people who had died.

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So, it's impossible to find any of them ever saying that - - - so it's entirely my opinion, so I wouldn't want to say that I have some, you know, "golden path" to the truth, because I don't - - - but as someone who's worked with memory and history and oral history for a long time, I just think that they have decided to protect themselves.

And your question was why?

If we're thinking about say sexual violence, then as now there was a certain stigma attached to being a victim of sexual violence. And the stigma doesn't stem from the fact that --- how can I put it? I think there was a certain 'shame' attached to being a victim of sexual violence. And they didn't want to have to discuss any of that.

So it's a way of closing over the possibility of a shame that's attached to that sort of crime, I guess.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Yeah, this wasn't the time of "#MeToo". It was likely that 'loss of honour' or 'reputation' or 'shame' would have been front of mind for the women of that time, and, further anguish for the nurses' families left behind.*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: But in the 1940s, there was a very different understanding of femininity, of respectability, of privacy. And all of those issues were put in peril or triggered if a woman came out and claimed --- or stated --- that she had been raped in war. And I think there was no appetite at all for opening up those avenues of conversation --

MEGAN SPENCER: --- Back then?

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Back then, yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: *As we know, sexual violence is another terrible weapon of war. As Christina mentioned earlier, the Japanese soldiers the women on Radji Beach had encountered that fateful day in February 1942, were those of the same regiment of the Imperial Japanese Army reported to have used sexual violence against nurses in Hong Kong hospitals just before getting to Singapore.*

It was the same regiment that had triggered their late but eventual evacuation from Singapore island by the Allied commanders.

The Australian Army Nurses had also heard about these rumours, writes Ian Shaw in 'On Radji Beach'. Forcing women into sexual slavery was also part of the Imperial Japanese Army's history before and during World War Two, as it's been documented.

In more recent years the question of whether or not the nurses on Radji Beach were the victims of sexual violence prior to their execution has been the focus of further historic investigation and research. Some say that at the time in 1945 and in the ensuing post-war years, there was a cover up, with after-the-fact witness accounts from the beach

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supporting the likelihood or possibility that it did take place. And that those who knew were gagged by the authorities in subsequent war crimes trials and investigations.

In the epilogue of her 2019 book 'Angels of Mercy', military author Lynette Silver makes such a case.

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CHRISTINA TWOMEY: So there is evidence from other sources that the story about walking in a straight line towards the water - - - and about machine gunning bayonetting - - - is perhaps not as, as we would think?

And then you put that together with the fact that the battalion who carried out the execution was the same battalion that had been present on Hong Kong, when the nurses and so on were raped there... The evidence is starting to mount up.

But, there is no smoking gun that can absolutely confirm that that's what happened. I think the accounts that we do have - - - which are unverified - - - don't get us any closer to knowing, either.

MEGAN SPENCER: *One thing is for certain though, whatever did or didn't happen, this is a difficult idea to think about, for a number of reasons...*

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: It's one of the difficult - - - I mean - - - it's funny to say that "one of the more difficult stories of World War Two". I mean, what war story isn't difficult in some way? But the way - - - even when I think about it - - - there's a level of discomfort around this story that is very, very hard to sit with and to reconcile. Why do you think that is?

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I think because, one, it's not just the fact that it's a massacre of vulnerable women who are medical personnel who should not have been exposed to danger in the first place, and who should have been protected by the Geneva Convention... So there's numbers of layers of disjuncture and shock in the story.

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But in more recent times there's now been this spectre raised of, 'did events on the beach occur in the way that Vivian Bullwinkel described them?' 'Were the women who were massacred also raped before they were killed?'

And when we think about that, and we begin to wonder if they were raped, in a way, one feels drawn into a voyeuristic speculation about sexual violence. And it feels very challenging as a woman and as a historian, to think that I might be participating in that sort of voyeurism about women's experiences of war being primarily about their bodily vulnerability?

So I feel uncomfortable because I want to know the answer to that question too! It's a really human need to want to know 'the truth'.

But when the truth is about a potential act of sexual violence, suddenly you feel you're drawn into a voyeuristic position that assumes that the most dreadful thing that could happen to a woman is rape, and to want to know about that sexual vulnerability.

So, I struggle with my own need to know or desire to know as well.

MEGAN SPENCER: Does it make the story worse? Is it important that we know whether or not sexual violence was part of this story?

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: It is important to me, and I think it is important to our society. Because, we need to understand that war often carries a threat of sexual violence as well.

And if you erase the sexual violence from the massacre - - - the massacre's bad enough. But if you take out the sexual violence, you take out one of the truths of war and one of the hyper-masculine elements of it, that makes - - - most often - - - women very, vulnerable in a situation of conflict.

So it's not just about "knowing the truth of what happened to those women on that beach". It's about knowing the truth about the horror and the vulnerability of women in war.

So, that's why it's important to me to understand and know the truth.

MEGAN SPENCER: And the other side of this is, if they were the victims of this extra layer of atrocity, it's their right not to talk about it if they don't want to, isn't it? Especially given the time when they came back into Australia?

And this story of what happened on Radji Beach, whether or not sexual violence was part of it or not, punched a hole through the heart of Australia? I think that's not too dramatic a thing to say. And I have thought about how the families would have coped even less having known that part of the story if it was true, as well.

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Absolutely. And there's one letter in Vivian Bullwinkel's papers where it's her cousin or something, writing to her mother, saying, "Well, at least you know that there was 'one thing' she was spared." And he doesn't actually say what it is? But you can tell from the context of the letter that that is what he means.

So that goes to your point about, it would be a double shock and a double tragedy.

[MUSIC: SHAKUHACHI]

MEGAN SPENCER: *In her 2022 lecture for the History Council of South Australia exploring Vivien Bullwinkel's remarkable life, Professor Melanie Oppenheimer makes the point that different generations will have different questions about what happened on Radji Beach as we move further away from the 16th of February 1942. She says there's an imperative for historians to continue to "assess and analyse new information as it comes to hand".*

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"That is our job, that's what we do", she says.

And in the notes from his 2021 lecture, 'The Re-examination of the Massacre on Bangka Island: A Case of Japanese Military Violence Against Women', retired Professor Emeritus of Hiroshima Peace Institute, Dr. Yuki Tanaka says, "we need to expand the #MeToo movement into one that engages not only in current problems but also in historical issues, demanding justice for all the victims, including those in the past."

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[END TIMESTAMP: 25:05]

MEGAN SPENCER: *That's Dr. Tanaka playing the Shakuhachi, the beautiful Japanese bamboo flute.*

[AUDIO: trams and traffic]

LIZ ALLWOOD: Sure --- my name's Elizabeth Allwood and I'm the Centre Manager at the Australian Nurses Memorial. And we're here on St Kilda Road at 431 St Kilda Road.

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MEGAN SPENCER: Can you describe for me the memorial, Liz, that we're sitting in front of right now --- what does it look like?

LIZ ALLWOOD: The memorial is a rather large stone edifice. But around the front of the memorial we have a sculpture of a nurse. And then underneath that we have a plaque, "to remember those nurses who gave their lives for their country and those who served in the Armed Forces during the Second World War, 1939 – 1945".

And at the bottom of that, "may they kindle in your hearts a torch whose flame shall be eternal".

MEGAN SPENCER: *The elegant statue Liz Allwood describes sits in front of 'Version 2' of the Australian Nurses Memorial Centre, an office and a venue integrated into a tall apartment block along Melbourne's iconic and bustling main arterial, St. Kilda Road.*

In 1949 the original Nurses Memorial Centre was established at an imposing Victorian-era mansion on this site, bought with funds raised by Vivian Bullwinkel and her fellow prisoner--of--war camp survivor Betty Jeffrey, who became well known for her account of the nurse's ordeal in her 1954 book 'White Coolies'.

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Back when they were in the women's Palembang camp, the surviving sisters pledged to create a 'living memorial' for nurses back at home --- a place to commune, commemorate and celebrate nursing, in the name of their AANS sisters who had not come home from World War Two.

LIZ ALLWOOD: These nurses that were survivors --- Vivian was shot and survived! And the pair of them survived this horrific time in a prisoner--of--war camp and had the resilience and the fortitude to roll up their sleeves and go, "We're going to do this! We've got a goal and we're going to get it done!"

And as much as they wanted it to be a living memorial, they always wanted it to be a reminder of all the lives that were lost so unnecessarily.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Barely two years out from their ordeal, in 1947 the nurses set out on an epic road trip in Betty's little Austin car across regional Victoria. They were on a mission.*

Supported by other nurses and survivors, they took in schools, hospitals and councils, and spoke to local media...

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LIZ ALLWOOD: Then they did a fundraising campaign and raised the most funds at that time that had been raised in a Victorian fundraising campaign. And they raised just on 130,000 pounds. And then they searched around and found the beautiful old house " that was on this footprint and purchased that house, so it could be a place where nurses could come, gather, learn and share and tell their stories.

MEGAN SPENCER: *In front of 500 guests, the Centre -- then called the 'War Nurses Memorial Centre' -- was officially opened in February 1950. Its dedication also included the nurses lost in the sinking of hospital ship Centaur during World War Two, in May 1943.*

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One of the Centre's many functions is to promote and honour the qualities of the women who served. It also supports nurses through scholarships as a way of kind of 'paying it forward' --- connecting the past with the present.

LIZ ALLWOOD: But what I get overwhelmed with --- and the part that I enjoy the most --- is that then people hear the story! Most nurses are not aware of our amazing heroes of Vivian and Betty.

So all of a sudden they are aware there's a scholarship available; they come to our website and they read our stories and they're overwhelmed with these brave women that survived, and have come back to have a living memorial of what these nurses can now be a part of! So it's a connection.

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MEGAN SPENCER: *The ANMC also runs events and fundraisers and makes the presence of nurses felt around ANZAC Day each year. This year, I happened to rumble past the ANMC on a St. Kilda Road tram the day before ANZAC Day.*

Smiling to myself, I could see a huge crowd in front of the statue that Liz and I had chatted in front of.

LIZ ALLWOOD: ANZAC Day is *the* commemorative day to remember *all* of those who fought to make our lives what they are today. And people forget that there were nurses there as well! So all these wars --- from the Boer War --- there's been nurses there to support.

So for us to come together and commemorate, tell stories, share on the learnings... And I think it's a story that needs to be taught! Because it's part of history! Like it happened! And it's dreadful that it happened!

Yes, it definitely should be a story that is told, and Australians should know about this as part of our history.

MEGAN SPENCER: *As we've heard, the lives of the women who died on Banka Island and those of their comrades who survived the sinking of the Vyner Brooke to become prisoners---of---war, are inextricably linked.*

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Whichever way you look at it, the story of the Australian Army Nursing Service nurses is one of sisterhood.

And while I was researching this story I came across the British TV drama series 'Tenko', made about the women of the Japanese prison camps in World War Two.

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Broadcast in the 1980s and created by Lavinia Warner, at the time it was ground breaking --- and it also included the character of an Australian Army nurse.

It led me to Andy Priestner who wrote a book about the series, 'Remembering Tenko'.

ANDY PRIESTNER: Okay, so my name's Andy Priestner. And about 10 years ago I wrote a book which was all about the TV series *Tenko*, which I'd loved since I was a kid.

And when it was first broadcast in the UK I was only about eight or nine years old, but it had a huge impact on me! And it was a story I'd never forgotten and later prompted me to find out the real story of the women who had been interned.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Andy found himself really drawn into this unique story of women in war.*

ANDY PRIESTNER: And --- it blew my mind the real story. It was that righting that wrong of making sure these women's stories were brought to life and were shared. And I thought that was really important.

MEGAN SPENCER: *One of the things that Andy finds inspiring in this story, are the bonds that were formed between the women --- which of course is part of the all of the nurses' stories who were in Singapore, as well as those who made it to the camps.*

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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 that was *essential* for them to survive.

And that was something that also gave them a unity, a community, a purpose and life skills and knowledge that they would never have had, had it not been for that experience.

And somehow, they found liberation: liberation of self, liberation to express themselves as women in a time --- in the '40s --- when this was not so "acceptable", you know? They found meaning and purpose.

But it's also --- I mean it's a story of terror and uncertainty and, you know, it's unimaginable horror. But at the same time it's the triumph of the human spirit, it's the recognition that --- of support for each other, of love that's unconditional. And also, particularly crucially, it's about the women --- for me --- and the fact that they are women.

And there's that 'Aussie grit' as well which I think is a huge part of it. "We can do anything, we'll not let the buggers get us down!"

And it was that sort of passion and straightforwardness that I think the Aussie nurses had and that carried them through --- that they were 'can do', "we'll get through this". Obviously, some of them didn't, but not because of their courage, because of circumstance. Yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: So you do think this is a significant story?

ANDY PRIESTNER: Oh, absolutely. Hugely significant!

Um, I think part of that significance is because it's about women together. And I think we can learn something about that.

But it's also about sisterhood, it really is. And the fact that such a close bond and purpose could be forged in those terrible fires of war.

MEGAN SPENCER: *And as we leave Andy and his takeaways from the nurses' story --- those who made it to the camps and those who did not --- this sisterhood forged by war... I wonder, given Christina Twomey's deep research into this story, how she thinks we might remember these women well? And what can we take away from this very difficult story of women in war?*

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I do personally see them as people who paid the price for Australia being at war. They're women who were absolutely in the wrong place at the wrong time. They are victims of horrendous violence.

So, for me, they tell us about the stark reality of war. They tell us about the mess and horror and suffering. And we shouldn't turn away from that.

Because one of the ways one might hope that you can prevent people being willing to go to war in the future, is by understanding the horror and suffering that sits at the heart of it.

But I also think, rather than just sort of humanising the experience of war, we also need to remember that women too have suffered in war. And that women too have experienced horrific things and witnessed horrific things.

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And war is not only a male game: that women were there and women were on the frontline.

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End of Part 02 transcript. Please go to Part 03.