

Transcript Part 3 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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Part 03 (duration: 29:18)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *This program contains concepts related to war and some depictions of war and its aftermath.*

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[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] LTCOL Karl Haas (Retd): *I would like to acknowledge the attendance today of members of the families and friends of those massacred at Radji Beach --- after the sinking of the Vyner Brooke --- and those who endured three years as prisoners--of--war of the Japanese.*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *It may have been 80 years ago, but the loss of the young nurses on Radji Beach still reverberates down through the generations, today.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *So in alphabetical order, they are: Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, Keswick, 16.2.1942, aged 30. Sister Alma Beard, Perth, 16.2.1942... (fades out)*

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[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] LTCOL Karl Haas (Retd): *We have here today descendants of sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, Australian Army Nursing Service, killed on Radji Beach, and descendants of Sister [Lorna] Fairweather, Australian Army Nursing Service, who was also killed that fateful day.*

MEGAN SPENCER: *As you can imagine, the loss to the families at the time was huge, and these women have never been forgotten. At today's commemorative ceremony in Adelaide, I have the chance to meet the family members of two of the nurses who fell on Radji Beach.*

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *Sister Lorna Fairweather, Woodside, 16.2.1942, aged 29.*

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[AUDIO: Catafalque Party drums and "halt!"]

JILLIAN DAVIDSON: *My name is Jill Davidson. And my mother's sister was Lorna Fairweather, so my aunt.*

JOHN FURLER: Yeah, my name is John Furler, and Lorna was my aunt.

LIZ HOLZNER: And I'm Elizabeth Holzner, and Lorna was my aunt.

MEGAN SPENCER: *From South Australia, Australian Army Nurse, Staff Nurse Lorna Florence Fairweather, was born at Stirling West on the 31st of January 1913, the daughter of Percival Sydney Howard Fairweather and Florence Annie Johnson.*

After attending Adelaide High School Lorna excelled as a trainee nurse in the early 1930s, firstly at Mareeba Babies Hospital then Adelaide Hospital, becoming a registered nurse in 1936. She went on to work as a charge sister at what was then called the Crippled Children's Home in Somerton Park, and she lived with her parents in Broadview, both of them suburbs of Adelaide.

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Lorna was a quiet, studious young woman and a practising Methodist. Aged 28, she was called up for duty in the Australian Army Nursing Service on the 2nd of July 1941 at Woodside.

As Ian Shaw notes in 'On Radji Beach', Lorna Fairweather was one of the most highly qualified of the Australian Army Nurses, a relieving matron herself when she enlisted.

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On the 28th of August 1941, Lorna left Adelaide for Melbourne and on the 2nd of September embarked with the 2/13th Australian General Hospital on board the Wanganella, bound for Singapore. The 2/13th AGH arrived there on the 16th of September 1941 and set up at hospital at St Patrick's School in the island's south west.

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As the war with the Japanese progressed, twice between October and December in 1941 Lorna was temporarily detached for duty with the 10th AGH at Malacca, but on the 13th of December 1941 she returned to the 13th AGH. At that time the hospital was at Tampoi but it returned to St Patrick's School in Singapore in late January 1942. Which illustrates the fact that as Singapore fell into chaos, hospitals were set up pretty much anywhere there was a suitable place.

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On the 12th of February 1942, Lorna Fairweather left Singapore on the SS Vyner Brooke, and, after its sinking, she made it to Bangka Island where she was executed by members of the Imperial Japanese Army on the 16th of February, 1942. She had just turned 29.

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After the war, in 1949, Lorna's father made inquiries to the Australian Military Forces, about the whereabouts of his daughter's grave on Bangka Island.

Referred to the ANZAC Agency of the then Imperial War Graves Commission, Mr. A. E. Brown, the Secretary-General, wrote back to him a heartfelt letter, saying [ACTOR'S VOICE]: "All efforts to locate the grave have failed and I feel I can hold out no hope of the grave of your daughter ever being located and identified."

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"I very much regret that I cannot offer you a more satisfactory reply... But I feel it is better to give you the full particulars... rather than hold out any false hopes that the grave may ultimately be located".

In 1953, Lorna's family was sent her service medals: the 1939--45 Star, the Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal and the Australian Service Medal.

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Lorna Fairweather's Service Number is SX 13431.

And, here I am, now, 80 years later, with her living relatives: Lorna's nieces Jill and Liz, and her nephew John.

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: So we've got two nieces and one nephew of Lorna Fairweather standing in front of me today. And you've just attended the Bangka Day Memorial Service, the 80th anniversary. And I'm wondering how this was for you, this experience? Could you let me know how you're feeling right now?

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JILL DAVIDSON: I feel really sad, just overwhelming sadness that... Firstly, I didn't know her [Lorna], and that she died in such circumstances. And how awful war is for everybody, under all circumstances; that's my overwhelming feeling from today.

JOHN FURLER: Well I feel really privileged to be here. And yeah it's sad that I didn't know Lorna. You still feel the loss --- I really feel sad that I never got to meet her. And sad for my mum and her family and how terrible it must have been for them.

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MEGAN SPENCER: Liz?

LIZ HOLZNER: Well, I echo all of those things. And I suppose I feel shocked in a way that this is really the first time we've talked about it, together.

MEGAN SPENCER: I know this is very emotional for you. And I'm sorry that it's bringing this up for you. Um, but maybe --- I'd like to ask another question to you all, in this sadness...

There are a lot of people here today. There's probably about 400 people here today --- and there are young people here, there are old nurses here, there are defence people here --- there are also civilians, all sorts of people.

And I'm just wondering how that might make you feel?

LIZ HOLZNER: I mean obviously it's helped us galvanize our thoughts around it and have a discussion --- the whole process of getting this together.

But for the families of, of people who died in those circumstances and who were unable to talk about it, and grieve and help their families live with the reality of this, it's been really overlooked, I think, hasn't it?

I mean --- I don't know whether our family is unique in this respect? But the silence that accompanied her death and those of her colleagues, within the family, was profound.

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JOHN FURLER: Oh, well, just in terms of how many people are here and the sort of enormous group... I'm really --- I suppose I'm really pleased to see how strong the memories are for people. How much they honour them. Yeah, it's terrific.

MEGAN SPENCER: And the acknowledgement of this?

JOHN FURLER: Absolutely. Yeah. It's unspeakable what those women had to go through, So... Yeah, so, to --- to honour and acknowledge, and to continue to do that? I'm really pleased.

JILL DAVIDSON: [And that's what we didn't have, isn't it?] That's what we didn't have as a family. We weren't allowed to really acknowledge her bravery --- or their bravery --- and sacrifice.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Jill tells me that their mum, Betty --- Lorna's younger sister who was born in 1925 --- was a teenager when Lorna died, and remembered this time as one of total trauma in the family. She said that Betty's parents --- Jill's grandparents --- became reclusive. They spent weeks weeping and again, in Jill's words, "were not very functional". Betty rarely spoke of Lorna's death and all the kids pretty much knew the subject was unapproachable.*

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I ask about what kind of an impact this silence might have had on the on the family, down the line...

LIZ HOLZNER: It's funny, I think it sort of skipped a generation. But, we certainly found early on --- relatively early on --- that it had an enormous influence on our family's experience and the way we all developed. And we did reflect enough to realise we didn't want to do things that way... 'The silence' --- you know what I mean?

JILL DAVIDSON: I think --- I feel also sad that Mum... The silence... There was a way Mum could have --- she could have been a part of this? And it would have helped her. And I feel a bit sad that she didn't allow that, or couldn't come to that.

JOHN FURLER: I think you've got to --- looking back at, you know, our grandparents --- you've got to acknowledge their honour and dignity I think? I think that was --- yeah that's the best they could do.

MEGAN SPENCER: Was it the time?

JOHN FURLER: Yeah. So --- and really, I really acknowledge that. You know, that was hard, so hard.

But yeah, I think going forward, you know, we're more open as a family talking about death and dying and, um... But it's certainly been a shaping influence, an important influence, yeah.

JILL DAVIDSON: She does live on. Even the fact that we had this 'archive of history' that we really didn't know... what to do with.

It [Lorna's loss] was so much a part of an event that shaped a lot of temperament and emotion in our family, that we've all needed to know how to --- where to put it [the emotion] --- as well as the archive. Yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Jill kindly gives me this 'archive' to look through for this podcast. It's an extremely moving experience. As I touch each object in it feels as if my hands are reaching back through time. It's like an emotional roadmap.*

The newspaper clippings Lorna's parents keep from the time of her service, are a window into fading hopes, as first she goes 'missing' in Bangka Strait, then 'missing believed killed' and later 'missing presumed dead' after the Army issues an official announcement in 1945, in the papers.

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There are Lorna's nursing certificates, character references, Army papers and amazing black and white photos Lorna sends home in 1941, excited about her first few months of service. One is of her leaving the Australian Hospital Ship Wanganella in Singapore with the single word, [VOCAL ACTOR] "Disembarking! – exclamation mark" handwritten on the back in pencil.

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Another shows the Army nurses crammed into frame, smiling and waving home madly, wearing hats and gloves and the new cotton tropic-friendly uniforms they'd urged the Army for. Now familiar with their faces, I recognise Vivian Bullwinkel at the front of this photo, and then crowded in three--deep behind her and partially obscured from view, bespectacled Lorna, looking straight at the camera.

Filled with life, their faces are jubilant and united by purpose. War has not yet come.

On the back of another image, addressed to "Bet", Lorna's younger sister, Lorna describes her new exotic hospital quarters. "Rather thrilling to belong to it," she says adding, [VOCAL ACTOR] "You can see the flagpole, but on it we fly a big cream flag with a red cross in the centre."

Perhaps she's trying to reassure her everyone at home that she would be safe.

[AUDIO of scroll unfurling]

MEGAN SPENCER: *I unfurl a commemorative scroll on thick cream parchment – ‘royal’ cream parchment as it turns out. Wrapped around it on Buckingham Palace letterhead, there’s a heartfelt note of condolence to Lorna’s family, signed in fountain pen by the then King of England, George the VIth.*

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The scroll with Lorna’s name on it reads: [VOCAL ACTOR] “May her sacrifice help to bring the peace and freedom for which she died”.

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[AUDIO: Bagpipes]

MATTHEW SLOAN: So my name is Matthew Sloan. My grandfather was Jack Balfour--Ogilvy who was first cousins with Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, killed in the Bangka Island massacre.

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MEGAN SPENCER: *Hailing from a service family, Australian Army Nurse Sister Elaine Lenore Balfour--Ogilvy, was born in Renmark in South Australia on the 11th of January 1912 to Major Harry Lort Spencer Balfour--Ogilvy and Jane Keyes. The fourth of five children, Elaine attended Renmark High School and Woodlands Church of England Girls’ Grammar School in Glenelg.*

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Training as a nurse at the Children’s Hospital in Adelaide --- now the Women’s and Children’s Hospital --- “Lainie” as she was known also excelled in her profession, working at the hospital and in doctors’ rooms in the city.

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Aged 28, on the 13th of September 1940, Elaine enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service at Keswick in Adelaide. She was outgoing and gregarious and known for her beautiful singing voice. She began duty on the 10th of December 1940 at the army training facility at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills, later that month departing for Melbourne.

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In January 1941, Elaine embarked for Singapore attached to the 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station, arriving in Singapore on the Queen Mary on 18th of February 1941, as part of the 6,000--strong ‘Elbow Force’, the nucleus of the Australian Army’s 8th Division.

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[ARCHIVAL AUDIO: “Shuffling feet move in step, in swinging columns, in battalions”. (fades out)].

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MEGAN SPENCER: *Later in 1941 Elaine was attached to the 2/9th Field Ambulance in the Seremban area just south of Kuala Lumpur. On leave in November, she accidentally injured herself while walking on uneven ground at Batu Pahat, fracturing her left fibula in her leg. The records don’t show how bad the break was but even a minor fracture would have taken several weeks to heal.*

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So it's likely that by the time Singapore fell in February 1942, she was mobile but sore, coping not only with an influx of sick and wounded soldiers but an injury of her own.

On the 23rd of January 1942, as the Japanese forces advanced, the Australian 2/9th Field Ambulance began its retreat towards Singapore Island. By the first week of February the area near the unit was being bombed; by the 8th it was being shelled. All this took place while more and more casualties were coming in, in conditions of great confusion.

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On the 12th of February 1942, Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy was one of the 65 Army nurses evacuated on the Vyner Brooke. As it sank she stayed on board to help people into lifeboats.

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A strong swimmer from her youth in the Riverland, hanging on to a rope trailing one of the lifeboats, Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy managed to make it on to Radji Beach. With Sister Fairweather and the other Australian Army nurses, Elaine was also executed there by Japanese soldiers on the 16th February 1942. She was 30 years old.

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Records indicate that Elaine's war service medals were sent to her mother in 1957: the 1939--45 Star, the Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War Medal and the Australian Service Medal.

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Her service number was SFX 10596.

[AUDIO: The Last Post and "lest we forget" spoken.]

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: I wonder how you feel right now after that service? What --- what came up for you after experiencing this service today?

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MATTHEW SLOAN: I think the main thing for me is the fact that just, you know, 80 years later they're still being remembered.

MEGAN SPENCER: *This is Elaine's relative again, Matt Sloan. Like Lorna's family members Jill, John and Liz, he's also just been a part of the Bangka Day 80th Anniversary Service at the Women's Memorial Playing Fields in Adelaide.*

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think this is a significant story?

MATTHEW SLOAN: Yeah, I definitely do.

Mainly just because I guess the fact that, the one thing that I've sort of said the whole way along was [that] Elaine in particular, she was there to help! You know --- so the fact that these 22 nurses that were killed --- that's all they were there doing!

Like they weren't infantry. They weren't fighting a war. They were there to help. That's all they wanted to do!

And that's the one thing that I've always been told with Elaine, was: she just wanted to help! The Balfour--Ogilvy's do have I guess a very prestigious war service dating back a number of generations.

So it was it was basically just her 'calling'.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Search the name "Balfour--Ogilvy" in the Virtual War Memorial Australia collection and a string of names pop up. Elaine's father and uncles share military service in earlier conflicts --- including World War One --- and her brothers Spencer and Douglas both returned from active service in World War Two.*

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Balfour--Ogilvy is a well-known family name in Renmark with Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy a beloved daughter of the town. And, as we'll find out today, she is well remembered by the community and her surviving family members.

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EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: When you look at the photos of her, she's always this lovely smiley person, with a great big smile. She was a very good swimmer. And she also had a beautiful singing voice. I believe, she could easily have been an opera singer had she gone down that path, but she chose not to. She chose to go into the caring role.

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But I think she was a very open, gregarious young woman.

My name is Eve Balfour--Ogilvy and my aunt was Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy. She was my father's slightly older sister. And they lived in Renmark where they were brought up and where I was brought up as well. It was a family of five and she was the fourth youngest.

MEGAN SPENCER: *The daughter of Elaine's younger brother, Eve was born during World War Two after Lainie's death. Eve's grandmother Jane was Elaine's mother --- or "Jenny" as Eve told me she liked to be called.*

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER I mean, this is a devastating event from World War Two. And I think, when I read about it --- and I've said this a few times now --- I feel like it punched a hole through the heart of the nation at the time. It was so shocking when these young women died, including your aunt, Elaine.

I'm wondering; do you have any sense of the effects on your family after this event did happen?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Well, I was thinking about that and I think it was so devastating... Nobody talked to me about it.

I knew that --- I grew up knowing that it happened. And my grandmother at the time, 'Poppy', her husband [Harry Balfour--Ogilvy], had just died on the 8th of September 1945. And very shortly after that information came through that the nurses had been lost.

So she was by herself. My father was home at the time. My uncle was still in England. My aunts were here --- Elaine's two sisters were here.

It was --- there was a silence around it. It wasn't really talked about. Both my aunt's had --- there's a beautiful photograph of Elaine in her nurse's uniform --- that was always on display in their homes.

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And, it was always I think just a terribly, terribly sad thing. But, but there was no discussion about what happened in the family at all that I can recall.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Growing up, Elaine boarded at St Peter's Woodlands Girls' Grammar School in Adelaide where there's an annual scholarship in her name.*

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EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: I was given her ring, for my seventh birthday --- it was the Woodlands ring which was a fashionable thing to have in those days. I got into the underground pool and promptly lost it! And there was a silence about that. I apologised. But there was a silence about it.

So, it was always a very, very sad --- there was a thread of sadness going through the family. And I guess I didn't really understand the terribleness of it until I started reading about what happened and putting it into perspective, to what was happening in Australia at the time.

They'd had six years of the war. The war had finished. People [were] coming home from the war and all of a sudden there's this terrible news and it really rocked everybody.

MEGAN SPENCER: Yeah, just listening to you talk I was getting images of --- there were 21 families around the nation affected by this. So really, the ripple effects were huge from this one event, weren't they?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Oh, oh, they were. And I think a lot of them found out through a newspaper report. Not like today where we've got wonderful technology. And I think, a place like Renmark; they went into shock.

MEGAN SPENCER: *For Eve, this story is all about service --- and sacrifice.*

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EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: I think it's really important to pass the story down so that younger people know we are living this life that we live in Australia, because of other people's sacrifice.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think that this is a significant story?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: I *do* think it's a significant story. I think – there are so many aspects to it. You know it's significant because it draws attention to the fact that we are *really lucky* in this country.

MEGAN SPENCER: It's a 'women's story' – it's very much a women's story in war, isn't it?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Oh it's definitely a women's story. And I guess that's why it's worth keeping promoting it, because it is a women's story. That is highlighted by the fact that when --- just before the nurses were taken out of Singapore, they actually resisted going. They wanted to stay and look after their patients. I mean, what's more civic than that?

They felt their job was there with their patients. And there were thousands of them just lying on the ground. I mean, it's an extraordinary picture you get in your mind, isn't it?

MEGAN SPENCER: It's a massive loss, isn't it? It was a huge loss of, you know, young people: all their training, all their skills and their lives and I guess the possibility of what would have come had they made it home?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Yes, exactly. It was just a complete and utter waste. But there was a lot of waste in war, wasn't there?

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *Um, so in alphabetical order, they are:*

Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, Keswick, 16 2 1942, aged 30.

Sister Alma Beard, Perth, aged 29.

Sister Ada Bridge, Sydney, aged 34.

LT Florence Cassen, Wayville, aged 33.

Sister Mary Cuthberton, Melbourne, aged 31.

Major Irene Drummond, Keswick, aged 36.

Sister Dorothy Elms, Paddington, aged 27.

Sister Lorna Fairweather, Woodside, aged 29.

Sister Peggy Farmener, Perth, aged 28.

Sister Clarice Halligan, Melbourne, , aged 37.

Sister Nancy Harris, Sydney, aged 29.

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scroll through -
photos of each
nurse

Sister Minnie Hodgson, Yealering, aged 33.

Sister Ellen Keats, Adelaide, aged 26.

Sister Janet Kerr, Sydney, aged 31.

Sister Mary McGlade, Sydney, aged 38.

Sister Kathleen Neuss, Sydney, aged 30.

Sister Florence Salmon. Victoria Barracks, aged 26.

Lieutenant Esther Stewart, Darlinghurst, age 37.

Lieutenant Mona Tait, Sydney, aged 27.

Sister Rosetta White, Burwood, aged 33.

Sister Bessie Wilmot, Perth, aged 28.

*And the sole survivor from the Bangka Island massacre, Captain Vivian Bullwinkel,
Burwood, 3rd of July 2000, age 84.*

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End of Part 03 transcript. Please go to Part 04.



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