

Transcript Part 5 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 05 (duration: 33:56)

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

[AUDIO: library ambiance, photocopier & scrabble pieces]

MEGAN SPENCER: *The High School Library isn't the only library in Renmark which pays tribute to Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy. A special room in the town's public library also bears her name.*

DEB AXON: I'm Deb Axon and I'm a Library Officer at Renmark Paringa Library.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Originally from the UK, Deb's been working at Renmark's library for the past 12 years. It's light and airy and in a nearby room local ladies pull no punches during their weekly game of scrabble.*

DEB AXON: Well we're actually sitting in the Children's Library in our library. And it's dedicated to Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy. Yeah.

I think one of the things to remember with these nurses was, they signed up! [Volunteered]. They weren't enlisted or anything - they didn't have to do this. They went forward and put themselves into the war effort. And, having heard her story, you just think it's tragic that more people don't really know it.

MEGAN SPENCER: What is it about her story that you've either learned from or have been fascinated or inspired by?

DEB AXON: I generally like survival stories myself - stories where people go through hardship and then come out the other end. And unfortunately this wasn't that type of a story.

But I think it still showed her spirit and the spirit of the nurses, You know? They didn't sort of give in or anything. They were there until the very end, walking into the sea. And that's a very strong image, you know, nurses all in a line walking into the sea.

MEGAN SPENCER: It is a remarkable story, isn't it? And for some reason, I guess we don't hear of it - we don't hear women's stories in war that much, do we?

DEB AXON: No. So it's not like a standard 'heroic war story': you know, the guy goes off... Well, these days, it wouldn't necessarily be a guy, but back then it would have been.

And so it's a group of women, who are serving their country, and serving the war effort as nurses. And then went through some tragic circumstances, you know? First the bombing of their ship and then landing unfortunately in the wrong place -

MEGAN SPENCER: - At the wrong time.

DEB AXON: Yes.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think it's important to actively practice remembrance? And if you do, why?

DEB AXON: I do, so that you keep it in your head what others have done in the past for you. And also [as] an act of knowing how lucky you are to live where you do and when you do. You know? We could have all been in this situation.

And what would have happened if they hadn't done what they did? What kind of a world would we have been living in?

MEGAN SPENCER: So do you think that remembrance is important? And in particular in Remark, do you think people engage with that?

DEB AXON: I think so. In recent years we've had a lot more kids taking part in remembrance ceremonies, and coming in and asking sometimes about things [about Elaine's story].

People will always be interested in this. So yes, I do think it's good.

MEGAN SPENCER: *After the interview Deb hands me a folder full of papers that a local historian has put together about Elaine's story. It includes an article from the dedication*

of The Children's Library on Remembrance Day in 1984. Elaine's older brother Spencer unveiled the plaque, and spoke, along with others.

I imagine it must have been a sad and proud occasion for the family members and the 150 people crammed into the library that day.

The late Captain Mavis Hannah, who became Mrs Nell Allgrove, an ex-prisoner of war and the last surviving nurse from Lainie's unit, the 2/4 Casualty Clearing Station, was also there.

The first line of her acceptance letter reads: [VOCAL ACTOR] "The story I have to tell is of heroism and endurance". And as I find out from the folder that Deb gave me, on the day she spoke and read out a message from her old colleague, Lt. Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel, now Mrs Vivian Statham, who was invited but unable to attend.

In her RSVP letter Vivian wrote: [VOCAL ACTOR] "I believe it is important that such sacrifices of Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy should be remembered, particularly amongst the younger generation".

[AUDIO: The Last Post]

MEGAN SPENCER: After I finish photocopying I get talking to the scrabble ladies. One of them kindly offers to lend me a book Spencer wrote about his life in Remark. In it I learn that both he and Elaine were born on the kitchen table of their childhood home which is not far from here.

I have the opportunity to visit and it seems not too much has changed since Elaine's father had it built in the early 1910s. It's modest but stately and very much designed as a family home for the five children who would live there.

A long, narrow room links the back with the front of the house - a parlour with a pressed metal ceiling. Hanging framed on the wall is the very same scroll as Lorna Fairweather's family had received from the King, only this one has Elaine's name on it.

And being in this room I get the strong feeling of a piano in this space. Knowing that Lainie had a beautiful singing voice – she'd been a member of the Adelaide Choral Society before going to war – it wasn't a leap to imagine the whole family gathered around it singing their hearts out back in the day.

And then afterwards, a silence; the kind that comes from the loss of war.

PETER MAGAREY: Well, it's an iconic part of Loxton. It's the centre part of town, and there's a plaque on the wall there indicating the World War One Memorial. There's also World War Two and then more subsequently, memorials to all of those who served from this district in all of the wars.

And then latterly, Carolyn and I and others have put up a plaque commemorating the street names of Loxton, which have a military history.

And also I think there are 15 battlegrounds that are commemorated in the streets of Loxton. So it's an open access war memorial.

MEGAN SPENCER: *I travel a little further along the River Murray to find another kind of 'living memorial' to Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy and the nursing sisters of Bangka Island. They're remembered in the very geography of this place, Loxton, a town just south of Renmark.*

The Loxton Street Name Memorial is unique in Australia. It's divided into three sections with streets named after South Australian Military Nurses, Victoria Cross medal winners with one George Cross winner and World War Two battlegrounds - around 50 streets in total.

At Loxton Memorial Rotunda now I meet locals Peter Magarey and Carolyn Wood – they explain how and why the very streets around here tell the history of war.

PETER MAGAREY: Well there's a long history – it started out of curiosity.

MEGAN SPENCER: So I believe that originally, a lot of the streets were named just - they were just alphabetised, "A-B-C-D"?

PETER MAGAREY: Yes, their alphabeticalised, according to the channel numbers from the irrigation settlement. So there was "G Channel" or "D channel" - that's where you lived, you might have lived on "H channel" ...

MEGAN SPENCER: And then post-World War Two when the soldier settlement blocks started up here in that time, the soldiers decided to change the names and dedicate them to those who had fallen or served the country. Is that right?

PETER MAGAREY: That's right. Yes. The settlement was started in '49 and was opened in '49, but this work started in '47.

MEGAN SPENCER: So very soon after World War Two?

CAROLYN WOOD: Yes, very soon after World War Two. They decided on that, because I suppose the world was still very conscious of the war, and especially in this place, because so many of them were returned soldiers.

MEGAN SPENCER: *In 2007, a comprehensive book was written about the street names of Loxton, explaining the story behind each one. Ten years later funding was sought to rebadge the signs with more information, to encourage people to engage more deeply with this unique 'open air' initiative started so many decades earlier by ex-servicemen, determined those from the region involved in and lost to war would not be forgotten.*

Peter, Carolyn and their small group of supporters were determined to put the Street Name Memorial on the map and not let it fade from view.

CAROLYN WOOD: So Peter and others I think got together and decided that they would do something about this. And Peter and his wife Carla wrote the book outlining all the street names, bringing to our attention, things that we saw every day and didn't take much notice of.

And so as a result of that and the centenary celebrations around World War One, then we decided that we would apply for some funds put up an additional plaque on our War Memorial Rotunda, that outlined the names of the streets, mainly of course by who they were.

MEGAN SPENCER: So that was bringing attention to say tourists coming to town or the town's people, to go and have a look at these streets and really get the meaning of them. Is that right?

CAROLYN WOOD: Exactly. It was bringing back into focus this particular part of our history that had almost been forgotten.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *An audio tour has even grown out of this project, with Carolyn researching and voicing the biographies of the South Australian nurses.*

[AUDIO: Carolyn's voice, "Balfour-Ogilvy Avenue: Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy of the Australian Army Nursing Service"]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy's story – and the proximity of it - affects her deeply.*

CAROLYN WOOD: Well there's also the horror of the way they died and what they saw before they died - but then also the great comradeship. And it's of course a very emotional story – and very gripping.

And it's good for us to hear these things because so many years on we tend to forget. It becomes history, it becomes something on the news or something that you learn about - but to really feel the impact that that this life-changing event - their deaths - had on the people around them. You cannot be unchanged by that.

MEGAN SPENCER: And if you think about it, like Renmark's just down the road... The effect that it would have had not only on her family but also rippling into the community after she didn't come home... Does that ever cross your mind as well?

CAROLYN WOOD: Well it does, especially when you think they didn't know! They didn't know until 1945. They didn't know what had happened to them. And then out came the awful story with Vivian Bullwinkel's survival - miraculous survival. And out came the stories. And then there would have been renewed grief.

And also, you know, that was probably part of the thinking - her [Vivian Bullwinkel] being so close to home [she is also from South Australia] - part of the thinking about why they put the nurses up there on the Memorial Street Names.

And that was our motivation, I think - was to make these stories *known*, firstly to our own community and then to the world at large.

[AUDIO: Driving and birds]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): And with that I'm driving out now to look at Balfour-Ogilvy Avenue with Peter Magarey.

It's a super-windy day and you can see all of these beautiful orange and yellow roadside daisies – I think they're called 'gazanias' - flanking us and waving in the wind. There are also lots of gum trees here, fluffy wine vines and a vast blue sky over the top of us.

I'm following Peter's car out to Balfour-Ogilvy Avenue.

[AUDIO: car pulls up]

[ACTUALITY] MEGAN SPENCER: Here we are. And we're next to a very gnarly old gum tree. And here's the street sign: "Balfour-Ogilvy Avenue, Sister Elaine, World War Two, Bangka Island" is written just underneath the street name.

So here we are!

PETER MAGAREY: Here we are indeed!

MEGAN SPENCER: Wow! It's such a good idea.

PETER MAGAREY: Well, we thought so. And we've written a song about Loxton and the chorus of the song says, "Because they did what they did, we can do what we do". And that tells the story.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Peter tells me that the street memorial is laid out in a particular way.*

PETER MAGAREY: Yes, it's laid out with the nurses who died plus Vivian Bullwinkel. The military nurses streets - the Avenues - they basically run north-south and the VC recipients run east-west, basically.

MEGAN SPENCER: And intersect?

PETER MAGAREY: And intersect, yes. So it's done very thoughtfully and very appropriately.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Peter also points out to me that the longest street in the memorial belongs to local, Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy.*

[AUDIO: wind in trees]

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: What was it like for you, this experience of rebadging or re-signing these streets, and putting even just that little extra bit of information on each street sign? So we know where this person served and a bit more about their story? What was that like for you?

PETER MAGAREY: I think it's important to have done that. So that - it's like the dilution of information, like we're saying: "Who's Balfour-Ogilvy?" Well it's not Balfour-Ogilvy; it's "Elaine". It's not Elaine actually it was "Lainie". So we're talking about a young lady, the more we distil down and read her story.

If we can then make the connection with Bangka Island, World War Two battlegrounds and her death, we're learning a whole lot more about Lainie 'the person'. And it's not just a street name, therefore, it becomes a person and it becomes part of us.

And I think that's important.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *He also acknowledges that it's a remarkable women's story from wartime.*

PETER MAGAREY: I'm reminded that the nurses saw more horrors perhaps than even some of the soldiers. To see people dead and dying - the soldiers would have seen that, - they had a mission, and I don't mean to belittle that at all - they had a mission and they had to keep going and leave those horrors behind.

I suppose in some ways, the nurses likewise, but they were living with the horrors. They were trying to help that heal those horrors. That's no small feat! And I think both aspects need to be understood and recognised and absorbed.

MEGAN SPENCER: It is a very emotional story, isn't it? In particular, the story of these nurses who went to Singapore and what happened to them on Bangka Island - and also those who survived and went on to live in the POW camps?

PETER MAGAREY: Yes, absolutely. I can't really imagine this, but when I wrote the stories often there'd be tears on the keyboard.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *An intensely spiritual person, Peter has also been deeply affected by working on this project. He had close relatives who served in both world wars. So it's important to him that the stories of war are preserved.*

PETER MAGAREY: Yes. As the generations pass down, unless stories are maintained - like the First Australians - unless they maintain their story, it'll be lost.

The same is true I think for our generation. The generation I'm part of were the children of those that served in World War Two. They were children of those who served in World War One.

There's a dilution at each generation. When you hear firsthand - but when you hear second hand, stories start to get lost or diluted - and I think it's very important that we don't allow this dilution to escape too far away from us. It's going to occur, but not too far away.

And if we can maintain some of the thread and some of the essence of the horrors of war, maybe we'll learn to be better at living at peace together.

MEGAN SPENCER(narration): *Before I leave, Peter takes me to the street sign dedicated to Sister Lorna Fairweather. A farmer on a ride-on lawnmower chats on the side of the road with someone whose pulled up in a ute. We're separated by a tiny, bright orange weed flower, popping through the hard ground...*

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: For anyone listening to this, or the young people studying this story - the stories of World War Two, the stories of World War - what do you hope they might take away from learning about the story of Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy?

PETER MAGAREY: I'm not sure why but I'd like them to take away the idea that there's hope - that there's hope for tomorrow.

[It] doesn't matter what the circumstances [are], doesn't matter whether we're warring against - the pandemic or whatever. I'd like people to think that there's hope.

They fought for peace in their day and if we all do that as a generation - each of the young ones coming through - if they know that there's a thing called 'hope', that's of substance and is real - I have real hope for the next generation.

[AUDIO: car driving]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *So I've come back to Renmark again, to meet Sue Schubert and Ray Hartigan from the RSL. They have another remarkable war memorial to show me – but this one's indoors.*

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: Gidday Sue.

SUE SCHUBERT: Hello!

MEGAN SPENCER: Nice to see you again.

SUE SCHUBERT: You too!

MEGAN SPENCER: Where am I?

SUE SCHUBERT: We're at the Remark Soldiers Memorial Institute in Remark, which is the original Soldiers Memorial Institute.

MEGAN SPENCER: When was it built?

RAY HARTIGAN: [In the background] Twenty-six!

SUE SCHUBERT: "1926".

MEGAN SPENCER: Thanks Ray! [Laughter] Shall we go in?

SUE SCHUBERT: Yeah, come on in. Have a look.

MEGAN SPENCER: Wow [door squeaks].

SUE SCHUBERT: That squeak could tell some stories.

[AUDIO: Bagpipes]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Inside the Soldier's Memorial building are displays, photographs, a colourful mural depicting WWII and a massive World War II Honour Roll – I've never seen anything like it! Covering the entire wall, it's been hand-carved out of 19 unique wooden panels and has literally hundreds names cascading over it. Ray tells me that ironically, it was carved by a German internee at the Loveday Civilian Internment Camp which was set up during WWII, "just down the road".*

Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy's name is at the top of the 'Women's Auxiliary Services' list, with a little carved wooden cross just above her name.

Elaine's story clearly means a lot to locals Sue and Ray. She's in their hearts.

SUE SCHUBERT: I grew up in Renmark and went to school in Renmark. So we were always taught that she was from Renmark: a nurse that went to war and [of] the horrors that she seen and the horrors that we can only presume that she went through in her life while she was serving.

MEGAN SPENCER: So when you're in this room - I mean, you're surrounded - it's amazing with memorials, isn't it? You're surrounded by all these names and every single name represents a life lived and a life possibly lost to war? And/or a life that was touched by war...

RAY HARTIGAN: A life affected - that's what gets me. Behind every one of these is a wife, a mother, a family, a brother, a sister, whose life changed because these people enlisted, you know?

MEGAN SPENCER: How about you Sue, tell me what you see in this mural that you've got here on the opposite wall? What are we looking at here?

SUE SCHUBERT: We're looking at soldiers, Elaine, there's planes, there's Japanese, it's boats and locals - as in Indigenous locals - as well.

So it's just - it's a bit of overwhelming when you look at it. And in the painting, she's smiling. And you'd think, well, "She wouldn't be smiling". You would you would think not, but you know, that maybe was her manner? And she just got on with the job.

RAY HARTIGAN: It's interesting. You see Elaine in her nurse's uniform looking, crisp, efficient - and then to think of what they went through on the beach and being shot – is overwhelming for me. Yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you get that sense about her character, when you look at that picture? Because she is smiling and that is seems to be an enduring thing that's written over and over again about the nurses who were in Singapore and also on Bangka Island - and even in the POW camps for the ones that survived - that resilience, I suppose? And trying to keep the spirits up?

SUE SCHUBERT: They put themselves aside to look after the soldiers and the injured. So it was just like, "Right we've gotta get on with it". It's like a 'country thing' - "Well, just get on with it and do it". That was her job. That's what she lived for died for.

MEGAN SPENCER: This is, what would you say? An "evolution" in the ANZAC story... How do you relate to her Sue, as a woman - and how do you relate to her as part of the ANZAC story?

SUE SCHUBERT: She just went to prove that women can do anything. And especially back then when "the woman's place was in the home" looking after the family. She was a woman that went to Adelaide, studied, got her degree, and then went overseas! And she just saw it as her duty.

RAY HARTIGAN: So in those days for a woman to go off and study was quite a thing anyway. And being a nurse or a teacher seemed to be 'the glass ceiling' in those days for women. So, just the fact that she was out working - and her parents let her go into the world - says to me that, they were way ahead of their time and what have you.

SUE SCHUBERT: You've also got to remember in that in that era, who *were* the nurses? They were the women - they weren't men. They were the nurses! So, she would have taken over her work ethic, integrity and just the sheer persistence to well, "We've got to get this done! We're here to do a job. We've got to get it done."

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Ray is a Vietnam veteran who knows combat. He agrees with Sue and is full of admiration for these women of war.*

RAY HARTIGAN: Yeah, it's interesting that the men were stretcher-bearers - they picked up the bodies and carried them into the field hospitals - where the women took over.

If you're going to have people wounded, you need nurses! And the medical system - the military medical system - is quite incredible! And the very thing that - being "politically incorrect" - that women are just so good at, is that nurture, love and tenderness. Which is totally missing in a war zone.

MEGAN SPENCER: What else do you feel looking at this mural, this pretty stark depiction of the unfolding of the war in the Pacific and Australia's involvement in it, Sue?

SUE SCHUBERT: It's just - it's reality! It happened! We all know it happened but standing here in front of it, you start to think about the soldiers that were there, the nurses that were there, the children that had to live through it? And how it affected different local towns when the soldiers *did* come back to towns.

It affected not just that soldier but the family and the community as a whole.

MEGAN SPENCER: Or of course, those who didn't come back - Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy being one of them. How do you think it would have affected her family and also the broader town, after they found out what happened to her, which took some time to come out?

SUE SCHUBERT: Distraught. It just - it would have rattled the whole community. And especially in the way that she met her death.

But you can only hope that she was - in her mindset she was just 'getting on with the job' and that was it. She thought that she was doing the right thing over there.

MEGAN SPENCER: Ray?

RAY HARTIGAN: Going to Singapore, was - and Singapore was so badly defended - it was the result of out-of-date, stupid military decisions along the way.

But 'the military' can't - is what happens [when there's] failed diplomacy. That's what happens. So diplomacy is where all efforts should be! In my opinion, I would defund the military. I would put the money into foreign aid so that there was *never* another war. Because the result of what you live with, happens for the rest of your life. It touches every part of your life!

That's why I'm so strong in being a member of the RSL. Because the RSL's remit is to never let the population forget, you know? We say, "lest we forget". And that's why it's just so important that memorials stay – and it's not glorifying war, it is commemorating sacrifice to the country.

SUE SCHUBERT: And it's because of people like Elaine that we've got a better world. She was the forerunner and changed things and proved things [so] that we could have an easier life.

So, to show that women could do anything in *that* era, the possibilities are endless for us.

[AUDIO: Catafalque Party]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *But I'm not finished yet. Over the bridge at Paringa there's another memorial that honours this daughter of the town... And as far as size goes this is the biggest memorial of them all. They certainly don't do things by halves in Renmark.*

[ACTUALITY] MEGAN SPENCER: So I've just arrived – just arrived at the Paringa Art Silos on which there's a giant mural of Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, depicted in a big side-on silhouette. She's wearing her nurse's hat and within the mural, up the top where her hat is, are thunderclouds.

And then beneath that you've got the brilliant red earth of this region, the Murray River region, which - the orange colour or redness of it is quite striking. And it's dotted - there's hills with little clumps of green trees. And then beneath that there's a cliff that just drops away into blue green water.

And in that is what looks like a little, I guess it's a houseboat or a riverboat? And to the side of her head at the back of this silhouette are two pelicans in flight and there's another one almost flying into the area where her eye would be, on this sideways silhouette.

So it's a really - it's quite striking. I imagine from a distance – I'm quite close up right now – but, from a distance, I imagine this would be quite surreal if you were, you know, driving in and seeing this.

But up close, I dunno, it's kind of striking it kind of draws you into the picture.

[MUSIC]

MEGAN SPENCER: *There are 4 silos with 4 unique murals, reflecting significant people and themes of the Riverland region – the gateway to the South Australian Silo Art Trail.*

Les Webb is Chairman of the Paringa Silo Art Committee and instigated this project. He's also the son of a World War Two veteran. Les meets me here at the foot of Elaine's silo. And to my eyes it's a giant contemporary war memorial.

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: It's pretty dramatic and striking this particular image inside the silhouette, isn't it?

LES WEBB: Yes.

MEGAN SPENCER: Why did you choose the dark clouds up the top where her nurse's hat is?

LES WEBB: Well, we wanted to have the image reflect her significance, I suppose. And what happened to her was, was nothing more than murder -

MEGAN SPENCER: - It was pretty dramatic wasn't it?

LES WEBB: Yes.

MEGAN SPENCER: It was dark, yes.

LES WEBB: And we wanted the scene to be dark in nature and not sort of 'bright sunny days'. It was nothing to look forward to in what happened to her.

MEGAN SPENCER: Les, do you see it as a bit of a memorial? Do you see this mural as functioning in that sense at all?

LES WEBB: We didn't intend it to be that, but it certainly is. There's no doubt the significance of her involvement in World War Two is portrayed there.

And we were mindful when we were settling on the images that this was - even though it wasn't put up there to be a memorial - it was going to serve that purpose, in a way perhaps, [for] the younger generation who had never seen that type of 'memorabilia' if you like, of World War Two.

MEGAN SPENCER: Is it a hope of yours that younger generations will engage with this big mural and the memory of Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, given that you're using the language of street art really to represent and depict her?

LES WEBB: Well, the whole process has to - has to be the responsibility of the next generation because we're all rushing out of this one! And someone's got to take care of it.

And that means the younger generation need to pick up the baton and make a mile with what this represents! It is clearly an aspect of tourism but it has the potential to be *all* different things.

You could imagine that it could be well used to demonstrate the good and bad in our past, mmm...

[AUDIO: trucks passing and footsteps]

MEGAN SPENCER: *This silo image towering over the surrounding countryside is certainly the most striking reminder of Elaine Balfour Ogilvy and in a moment you'll meet the mural artist who made it.*

But it's been a pretty big day. And as Les drives off, I linger a bit longer looking at the mural's colours changing in the light, as the sun sinks over the horizon...

I sit for a bit and reflect on the conversations from the day: why it might be so important to remember this shocking event in World War Two - and remember it in so many ways.

As Carolyn Wood said to me earlier, you can't be unchanged by this story.

So next we'll explore the legacy of Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, Lorna Fairweather and the other women who died on Radji Beach, 80 years on...

End of Part 05 transcript. Please go to Part 06.