

Transcript Part 4 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

Megan Spencer © 2022

Part 04 (duration: 28:17)

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

Slide 1

[AUDIO: Car driving and sounds of the bush]

[ACTUALITY] MEGAN SPENCER: So I've just arrived in Renmark. I'm staying at the caravan park on the River Murray, which is beautiful. And um, I'm leaving my husband Oliver here to put up our swag under a gum tree.

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But I'm on my way now to meet with Ray Hartigan and the RSL committee. Ah, they're having their monthly meeting. So I better get going or I'm going to be late.

NAVIGATION AUDIO: *"Starting route to Renmark RSL's home."*

MEGAN SPENCER: Yes m'am. [AUDIO: car starting]. See ya babe!

NAVIGATION AUDIO: *"In 2.1kms at the roundabout, take the third exit onto Renmark Avenue towards Town Centre."*

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *I've come to the country of the Seven Tribes of the First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region of South Australia --- the Riverland region in the state's northeast --- in the town of Renmark. It's absolutely beautiful here. Flanked by red earth and shimmering cliffs, giant river red gum trees dangle into the water. It's also stone fruit, citrus and wine--growing country; one of the Australia's 'food bowls'.*

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Renmark could be "just another town" that remembers its World War Two dead. But here perhaps the war story is made all the more poignant by the loss of one of their own in a war that was -- in quotations -- "not meant to hurt women"...

NAVIGATION AUDIO: *"At the roundabout, take the third exit onto Renmark Avenue towards Town Centre."*

MEGAN SPENCER: *And because the region had one of the highest rates of enlistments in the country, per capita, in both of the World Wars.*

The Riverland is known for its many post-war "soldier settler" blocks. Those who worked on them left strong traces of the struggle that happened during and after wartime.

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What happened on Radji Beach is also remembered here in so many ways by so many different people.

NAVIGATION AUDIO: *"Arrived at 15th Street. Arrived at Renmark RSL's home."*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *I start my local 'tour of remembrance' at Renmark RSL.*

[AUDIO: car pulling up]

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: Hello!

CHESTER WARREN: Welcome Megan!

MEGAN SPENCER: Is that Ray?

CHESTER WARREN: No --- I'm too good looking for Ray! I'm Chester.

MEGAN SPENCER: Hi Chester!

CHESTER WARREN: Hello Megan!

MEGAN SPENCER: Hello! Nice to meet you!

CHESTER WARREN: Same to you dear. Come in.

MEGAN SPENCER: Thank you very much!

RAY HARTIGAN: Megan --- I'm Ray! Please sit down...

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Past President of Renmark RSL, now committee member and Vietnam veteran, Ray Hartigan, does the introductions.*

[ACTUALITY] MEGAN SPENCER: Nice to meet you!

RAY HARTIGAN: Chester and his wife Sue... [laughter]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *It's a lively meeting of eight people -- present are ex-service members from Vietnam, a Somalia and Timor L'este peacekeeper, an ex-WRAN from the 1960s and a defence partner as well.*

RAY HARTIGAN: So we've got a whole group here for you and excited to see you.

MARGARET GITSHAM: Take a pew!

MEGAN SPENCER: Thank you.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *I'm warmly welcomed.*

[AUDIO: The Last Post]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *As you'd expect, this is a group of people who take remembrance very seriously.*

And to that end, for ANZAC Day 2017 the RSL committee came up with a unique way to honour Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy's memory and service, creating what they called a "placemat memorial".

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Scores of "laminated tributes... were placed in front of diners at... hotels and clubs in the Murray River township" reported the local ABC at the time. The aim was to engage people – especially the younger generation – with Elaine's war service story, in a meaningful, specific and interactive way.

RAY HARTIGAN: So Megan, these things are a placemat and a remembrance card that we did for Elaine two years ago? Three years ago? Three years ago.

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And ah, there was 2000 copies put into each of the papers in this area --- the usual interviews on the radio --- and [Elaine was] the veteran that was held up for ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day for that year.

So all the school kids researched her that year. And that was the topic for their essays that they write for the ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day.

MEGAN SPENCER: Did you get a big response to this story?

RAY HARTIGAN: Oh, a massive response from the schools! If you give the teachers the resources, they support you. So giving them the placemat and the name --- and the Virtual War Memorial, they were great --- the kids wrote their essays, and ---

SUE SCHUBERT: --- And it was a woman being researched.

MARGARET GITSHAM: Yes, we'd had a few men and I decided we needed a woman and she more than fit the bill. Yeah.

RAY HARTIGAN: The good thing with that is that it goes into all the eating places for the week of ANZAC. So not only while you're sitting there with their meal, it's on the table, and we found people take them with them when they go. So...

MEGAN SPENCER: It's great idea. It's a really good idea!

[AUDIO: The Last Post]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *I suddenly realise I'm sitting underneath the RSL's wooden Honour Board covered in names that stretch back over the last century – secretaries, past presidents --- including quite a few Balfour--Ogilvy's, the first being 'W. Balfour--Ogilvy' from 1918, who I'm pretty sure is Elaine's uncle, Walter.*

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[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: Is this a big remembrance town, would you say?

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:: Absolutely. Yeah for sure. Very much so. Very strong.

MEGAN SPENCER: Is it because of the Balfour--Ogilvy connection?

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: No... No. The RSL drives it.

MARGARET GITSHAM: It's not just the Balfour--Ogilvy thing. It's like with the Vietnam vets: there were more from Renmark that went than anywhere else in the Riverland.

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COMMITTEE MEMBERS: In the country. Per capita...

COMMITTEE MEMBER: Per capital it's the most intake from any region.

CHESTER WARREN: That's on record.

RAY HARTIGAN: But it's interesting --- the number of military medals, military crosses, Distinguished Conduct medals – overwhelming! Country people move to the army quite well. They were self--disciplined, self--starters, wouldn't do as they were told! [Laughter]

SUE SCHUBERT: But yeah, the RSL drive it, but the schools all get behind it and support it really well.

MEGAN SPENCER: What's the engagement like with remembrance with the young people here in this region?

MARGARET GITSHAM: It's growing, growing incredibly.

SUE SCHUBERT: Yeah, it's great.

RAY HARTIGAN: Those cards for Remembrance Day --- it says on the front: "we invite you to write a note of thanks to a veteran". And they can be their grandad or somebody they've researched. And on the back they write what they want to write to the veteran.

Then they put them together and they can lay them on the Cross Of Sacrifice on ANZAC Day or Remembrance Day --- which whichever day they want.

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CHESTER WARREN: Ray, you might want to --- excuse me – you might want to tell Megan about... (fades down).

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Chester, the RSL committee member who greeted me at the door, also mentions another Renmark RSL initiative called the ANZAC Youth Leadership Trust Awards. Local students are awarded \$500 each for showing leadership and skills that reflect the positive qualities of defence service. One of the Committee's missions is to invest in the future of the RSL – the next generation.*

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RAY HARTIGAN: The four pillars of the RSL are Commemoration, Education, Advocacy, and Friendship --- mateship. Now those things are important and education is the future. If there's no education, how do they learn about Remembrance Day? How do they know what it's about?

MEGAN SPENCER: I mean, we're sitting in front of this Honour Board and the first entry is in 1918. So we're, you know, a---century---plus---three---years on, sitting here right now. So the RSL is still here, it's still got a role to play.

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SUE SCHUBERT: We moved in here, on our 100th birthday!

RAY HARTIGAN: But the other interesting thing with moving in here --- and the young veterans are saying it now --- they don't want poker machines! They don't want grog. What they want is advocacy, mateship and friendship and support!

MARGARET GITSHAM: A place!

SUE SCHUBERT: Somewhere to have a chat!

MEGAN SPENCER: It's like a community I guess?

SUE SCHUBERT: Yeah!

MEGAN SPENCER: [Joking on exit] I'm just going to back away slowly now and feel free to say, "See you Megan!"

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: See you later! Bye! You've got a hidden camera! [Laughter]

MEGAN SPENCER: See you! Thank you! Bye, bye.

[AUDIO: driving off in the car.]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Ray, committee member Sue Schubert and I have made a date to talk more at Renmark's famous Soldier's Institute in a couple of days' time, which I'm really looking forward to. The Honour Roll there is even bigger with 840 names carved onto it, including the Women's Auxiliary Services.*

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And as I drive away from Renmark RSL, I realise I can't stop smiling. The zeal and energy of the group sticks to me like Velcro – especially their enthusiasm for the young people of this region – and their commitment to commemorating Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy.

So I'd better go and find some young people to talk to --- and where better to start than Renmark High School.

[AUDIO: bush sounds and school bell]

BEN FILES: Good morning, how are you? [Students' voices greeting]

MEGAN SPENCER: Hello!

BEN FILES: This is Anja, this is Fletcher and this is Stephen, all Year 8 students.

BEN FILES: So we're going through a bit of a project at the moment where we are renaming all of our school buildings from their original names from 1980, like "D block" and "C Block" and so forth, to prominent students from our history. And so we're about to go into the Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy Library.

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So this library has just recently been refitted, as you can tell it's quite white at the moment. And Sister Ogilvy's picture used to hang on the wall. But the intention being to turn it into a bit of a mural, a bit of artwork, so that as students come in they can see it straightaway.

Okay, so my name is Ben Files. I'm the Senior History teacher at Renmark High School. But I also teach the three students that you're going to talk to today.

MEGAN SPENCER: *It's another beautiful bright Riverland morning as I walk through the school with teacher Ben and three students who've put their hand up to speak to me today, one of whom is his son, Stephen.*

Ben tells me that they're all excited to talk to me about former student of the school, Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy. I'm also excited to talk to them.

FLETCHER HAYES: I'm Fletcher Hayes, I'm 13 and I'm in Year 8 and – I've forgotten the last one...

MEGAN SPENCER: What school do you go to?

FLETCHER HAYES: Renmark High School. [Laughter from the group.]

STEPHEN FILES: Hi, I'm Stephen Files, I'm 13 years old. I'm in year 8 and I go to Renmark High School.

ANJA TASSIOS: Hi, I'm Anja Tassios. I'm 13 years old, I'm in Year 8 and I also go to Renmark High School.

MEGAN SPENCER: *We stop at the door of the Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy Library, named in her honour after the school moved premises. An antique brass plaque is at the entrance, transferred from the old high school where a girl's amenity block was built in Elaine's name in 1957. Anja reads the inscription to me.*

ANJA TASSIOS: *"Dedicated to the memory of Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, a former student of this school who made the supreme sacrifice during World War Two."*

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MEGAN SPENCER: *The library is big and filled with lots of very quiet students. Ben waves to a few of them as we find our way to a little room to talk. I start by asking Stephen what he knows about Sister Elaine's wartime story.*

STEPHEN FILES: I know that she enrolled to become a nurse during World War Two and escaped from the Japanese in Singapore after Singapore fell to the Japanese. And they were eventually captured on an island where they were all killed in the ocean.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Anja goes next.*

ANJA TASSIOS: Yeah well, as Stephen just said, we have definitely mentioned her name in our history classes. She was definitely well known for the sacrifice that she made in World War Two and you know everything she did to help the soldiers as well.

MEGAN SPENCER: Fletcher, what are your feelings around this story?

FLETCHER HAYES: Well, I think that the overall feeling is, just, like, awe in how brave she was in signing up as quite young? And we learned that she was quite good at interacting with soldiers and keeping them, like --- trying to raise morale and doing what she could to improve the work ethic of all those around her.

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: So knowing what you know about her and how she dedicated her life to her profession, which was nursing, but then she also, I guess, dedicated her life to serving Australia during World War Two...

When you walk in that door, and you see the name of this library named after her and the plaque when you come in and her photograph... Yeah, how does that make you feel, sitting in in this place? Does it add anything to the library to being here?

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ANJA TASSIOS: Oh, absolutely. It does! It does add that question of look at you know, all of these people that have made such a contribution, not only to our school to Australia! It makes you wonder how, you know, incredible she must have been to have her name up on our library.

STEPHEN FILES: Ah, it just fills me with pride to know that someone that fought so bravely, in the --- behind the lines of healing all the wounded soldiers --- it fills you with pride to know that she went to this school.

FLETCHER HAYES: It makes me think back to when we were first learning about her and when we heard her story and then learned that she went to this school, I was just like, amazed... at how, even though we're a small country town, it is kind of humbling to know that we had such amazing people come through here?

And, that you don't need to come from a big name or a big place to make an impact in the world.

MEGAN SPENCER: Have you in your history studies, have you imagined what it might have been like during that time, World War Two, and putting yourself in her shoes?

ANJA TASSIOS: Oh, of course, you could have never just imagined how difficult it would have been to, you know, make all of those escapes and the worry and the fear that not only her but all of those nurses and soldiers had to go through. And it's really --- it's almost traumatising just to think how scary and upsetting it would have been.

STEPHEN FILES: I have thought about how it would be like, and I certainly wouldn't want to do that. But the bravery that she had to go through, to not only volunteer to go through that... But making split second decisions in having to escape from Singapore, that all could have resulted in her death very easily. Very brave person.

MEGAN SPENCER: In studying her story, and also other stories of World War Two, what have you learned, do you think? Like a big thing that you might have learned?

ANJA TASSIOS: A big thing that I think we probably all have learned is to be grateful for how we are as a nation and internationally. We have all learned to, you know, pursue our dreams because you never know what is possible. And you always look for a bright future.

And I think, looking at Elaine's story and other people's stories, it really makes you look at the positive aspects? And how one person can really change everything.

STEPHEN FILES: Ah, I learned just how many people actually went in to this. I knew that these world wars were big. But I didn't realise how many people from every town went --- like thousands of people from just a small country town went. Imagine how many people from the cities went? Like, millions must have gone maybe even? You only --- when you learn about it, you find out how devastating the effects of the war actually was.

MEGAN SPENCER: Fletcher, do you find Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy's story inspiring? And if you do, why?

FLETCHER HAYES: Ah, yeah, I really do find her story just a very inspiring thing to look at and think about. Because, again, it's just amazing to think that she went to this school, enlisted in this town and then went to such a place to try and make the world a better place for the rest of us.

She's just a very --- thinking of the story makes you appreciate everything you have, because she must have been such an amazing person to be able to try and boost everyone else up while she was in just as a as much of a terrifying position.

And it's just really inspiring that one person can be so selfless, to put themselves in such a position to try and improve the life quality of others.

MEGAN SPENCER: Stephen?

STEPHEN FILES: Ah, I find myself very inspired by the story of just how someone from such a small town could do something so big and so memorable. It's hard not to be inspired by that.

MEGAN SPENCER: Listening to you all talk it really sounds like she's touched your hearts. Is that a fair thing to say?

ANJA TASSIOS: Absolutely! Her story has definitely I think touched all of us. It's touched the whole community in Renmark and everyone who had a connection with the family --- maybe still does --- and really remembers her story, and shares it with everyone.

FLECTHER HAYES: I think, yeah, remembering stuff like what happened to Sister Elaine --- and "lest we forget": I think the big moral of the story is that, we as humans, we need to remember what we can do in good and bad ways, and how that impacts the world. And we need to remember that it's not something that we can take lightly, we need to remember what results do come of stuff like war.

ANJA TASSIOS: Something we definitely need to remember is: we are one globe, one world and we are all together. Though we speak different languages, we need to unite because we have to be peaceful! We have to come up with agreements! And yes, there will be disagreements at one point and there will be moments of countries having conflicts with others.

But at the end of the day we have to remember who we have lost, why we lost it, and how we can unite together and not have that come back to us.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Ben told me that the Year Eights have to do a 'time capsule' project, to be opened in 200 years' time from now. Anja, Stephen and Fletcher all included objects to honour the work of Sister Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy during World War Two.*

MEGAN SPENCER: So if she was sitting in this room here today, what would you say to her?

FLETCHER HAYES: "Thank you", for what she did. And her role was such a strong---hearted thing to do. And I'd just thank her for all the stuff she did for the soldiers as a whole during World War Two.

MEGAN SPENCER: Stephen?

STEPHEN FILES: I would probably say “thank you” as well for playing such a big part in morale--boosting in for the Australian Army – that, that helped protect the country. It was one of the building blocks that help protect us to what we are now as a country. And without that we might not be where we are today.

MEGAN SPENCER: And Anja?

ANJA TASSIOS: I would absolutely also thank her. She was such an incredible and powerful woman to have to sacrifice her life and live in those sorts of conditions. And she's such a beautiful person to remember and I would do nothing but thank her for what she did.

MEGAN SPENCER: I'm trying not to cry. [Laughs] It's very moving what you've said. But I do want to say to you all, thank you so much today for, um --- I am crying!

I'd like to thank you all today for your contributions to this podcast. It was really special... (Fades out)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *My tears are real; I'm super--moved and inspired by these young people and their sense of history – and fearlessness too: wanting to know this story and to learn from something so difficult and confronting.*

There's no way to sugar coat any of this, but somehow they've been able to take some good from it. And I wonder how Ben their teacher feels about teaching this story to them?

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: So, Ben, you just unleashed on me the “Team UN” in Renmark --- very special young people, who... And it seems that Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy's story touched them pretty deeply, listening to what they were saying,

BEN FILES: Yeah, look, the kids find a real connection to this story. It helps them identify that [when you think] Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy was in the first ever Renmark High School. She was a 13--year--old girl in 1925, when the school opened.

And it helps inspire them to think that they too can achieve great things. And I think that's a really strong underlying principle that I want to develop in the kids.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO: The Last Post]

BEN FILES: I think it's a really challenging thing for kids to identify to the ANZAC spirit? A lot of kids can't see themselves in war. And sometimes it's hard for kids to connect to the ANZAC Spirit because it seems so far above them and something they can't get to.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO: The Last Post]

And I'm really strong in pushing the value that we *all* have the ANZAC Spirit --- those soldiers and those nurses demonstrated it in the most extreme of circumstances. But as Australians, we all have those qualities in us as well. And those kids can honour what's been done before by ensuring they continue to use that spirit in their everyday life, whether it be in their schoolwork, whether it be in their sporting achievements, whether it be at home with their folks.

It's really important that what the ANZACs demonstrated under the most horrendous of circumstances, it's really important that our kids demonstrate it in their everyday life.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO: The Last Post]

These kids talked earlier about "commemoration keeps the story alive". But what keeps it alive even more is the opportunity to contribute to the story and feel like you are part of it?

And I think these kids --- you could hear the way they talked --- they genuinely feel part of the story. And I think that's incredibly important to the ANZAC Spirit and ensuring that we do connect to peace in the future.

Yeah, and these kids, they connect very deeply to it and I'm determined that that'll stay that way.

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: How do you personally connect to this story of Sister Ogilvy? We're sitting in this library right now that's named after her. And you sort of rushed up --- when we walked through the door --- and you were proudly pointing out that older plaque from the original high school. How does it land with you?

BEN FILES: It's difficult to put into words: I'm immensely proud to be connected with a school that Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy came to.

Renmark High School has over 450 veterans of World War Two and wars subsequent from World War Two. Renmark as a community had more enlistments in World War One than any other country town in Australia. And the same with World War Two.

It's part of our culture here in Renmark, 'service'. And to be connected to a school that has one of the most famous stories with service, with Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy, it's just immense pride.

And it is helpful. Things --- no matter what your job is --- a teacher, a doctor, a police officer --- your job is hard. And there are moments in it that are hard? But it's a library like this, and a person like Sister Ogilvy, that makes those difficult times a little bit easier to get through and gives you a reason to keep pushing ahead. Because if she can achieve what she achieved under the most horrendous of circumstances, we can get through anything at our end. And I think it's really important --- not just for the kids to know that --- but for us as teachers as well.

MEGAN SPENCER: You must be pretty proud of your students.

BEN FILES: I am! Look, I'm very proud of them. To sit back and just listen to how much of an impact of this unit of work and Sister Ogilvy's story has had on them, makes me immensely proud.

I feel like schools have an obligation to not just teach the curriculum on the paper, but to make the students that come through their halls better people.

And I can't help but think that stories like this have allowed our kids to become better people? Because they've learned from the courage and the attitude of Sister Ogilvy and brought it into their everyday life. And just challenging their thoughts on what they consider 'normal' and what people that went before them achieved.

It's just, yeah --- it's a really important part of the process of who we are as educators.

[AUDIO: car driving off and bush sounds]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Well it's been pretty amazing meeting the old and the young here in Renmark who are keeping the stories and the remembrance of what the nurses did during World War Two alive. But I'm about to find out how the legacy of this event --- and the loss of Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy --- is woven very visibly into the fabric of the whole area.*

Pretty much, you won't come here and not hear this story...

PETER MAGAREY: 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.

LES WEBB: There's no doubt that she is well remembered in the district and is representative of the district. And we're very pleased to have her as our chosen image for this part of the silo murals.

End of Part 04 transcript. Please go to Part 05.

