

Transcript Part 6 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 06 (duration: 34:29)

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

Slide 1

[AUDIO: ANZAC Day marching band]

JACK FRAN: For me, both my parents are migrants. And my dad's Italian and his family have all sorts of different stories through the Second World War especially. But as an Australian--born person, I still consider myself, like, Australian, so.

Yeah I've always gone to ANZAC Day parades and things and always – I don't know, just really connected through it --- and especially through the art, because we've painted a few war memorials now. And it's so fascinating learning about all these different things.

Sure, my name is Jack Fran. I am a large--scale mural artist. And yeah, I painted those silos.

Slide 2

[AUDIO: Bush sounds]

MEGAN SPENCER: *The Paringa Silo Art project was launched in February 2021. In the months before Adelaide artist Jack Fran and his friend Sam Brooks spent a couple of months high up a cherry picker painting the Paringa Silos with the image of Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy and other notable people from the region.*

Having lived in regional areas himself and grown up in South Australia, Jack told me right from the start he felt a really strong connection to Elaine's story...

JACK FRAN: Yeah, it was actually pretty mind--blowing and pretty intense, so...

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think working on this project --- and finding out about Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy's story --- did it change you in any way?

Slide 3

JACK FRAN: Yeah, yeah, definitely, I mean --- because it is one thing to just learn [it] in school and just kind of brush it off as like almost as though it didn't happen? But I don't know, somehow I just connected. Especially because like, it's not that long ago? Like, she could

have been a relative? And to have that happen to her, it was insane. I just can't even fathom that.

So I was quite emotional reading it and just felt a real strong connection to the whole thing.

MEGAN SPENCER: When I read her story --- like she died, you know, in her 30th year --- three decades of life! She packed a lot into that. It almost feels like there were quite a number of lifetimes in one lifetime for her?

JACK FRAN: Yeah of course! And also like her family had such a lifetime --- like her brother and her dad, too? So it was again, it's the same thing, because I'm 34 now, and I haven't done half of the stuff that they did, you know?

With the Silo Project I had to incorporate so many different themes. But I still wanted --- in a respectful manner --- just [to] highlight that, yeah, the people that lived here were some real people and they went through some real things.

She seemed like someone that just did it! Just "did". Which --- I don't know too many people nowadays, in that same situation, that would be the same. So it shows her character, I think, yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think we have a lot to learn from women like her?

JACK FRAN: Oh 100%! 100%! Like, even though they weren't on the battlefield, they still were in a lot of different ways. And yeah, obviously, their fate was very real.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you admire her?

JACK FRAN: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I was telling my son some of these stories. And he was like, "I don't get it?" He thought it was like from a movie or something? And it's like, "Well, actually, no. This is really real. Like it actually happened".

MEGAN SPENCER: *I also tell Jack that I see Elaine's silo as kind of a big visual war memorial that punctuates the horizon. She's part of the community, the land and our wartime history. Larger than life...*

Slide 4

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: There must be a lot of responsibility involved when you do these big community art projects, especially in regional areas --- and especially one so big that you can see so far so far around.

Did you feel that, I guess, sense of responsibility?

JACK FRAN: Yeah! For me, with any war memorial there is a huge responsibility to, not only portray their lives in an honest manner... But like, obviously, through such a violent time, to not make it so --- because it's public art, it can't be so violent --- but I think in a respectful manner that actually honours them?

Because often I see war memorials painted and, you know, they're often the same imagery and the same sort of poppies and so forth. But, I wanted something different.

And it's amazing: it really is just a silhouette but people recognise that? And that was enough for me to say, "Okay, I've done --- I've justified it". Yeah.

MEGAN SPENCER: And you've possibly painted the biggest war memorial in the country --- possibly?! Like, it's pretty tall that silo with Elaine's silhouette on it!

JACK FRAN: Yeah. That one's 15 meters high but I'd LOVE to do a bigger one! And I think there are some silos that are war--memorial--themed but not at that scale. So yeah, I'd love to paint a bigger one. Just because I think public art can resonate with people a lot. And I think, yeah, you can communicate the message of what they went through without it being so brutal.

Slide 5

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think remembrance is important Jack?

JACK FRAN: I do. I think it really does shape and make who we are today as a nation. Absolutely.

MEGAN SPENCER: And what about, like, younger people, maybe listening to you speak, as a street artist, as a mural artist? You know --- why should they look up at Elaine's silhouette? And what would you like them to reflect on and take away from that?

JACK FRAN: Just that she willingly played her part in a bigger story that we benefit from today.

Like of course no--one wants to go to war --- but *they* did! And that's when remembrance comes in. Like, again, without those people that went through those things, we wouldn't have the life that we have today.

So, a sense of gratefulness, I think.

And, it's quite tragic, how Elaine died. And obviously, if we can avoid that sort of thing again in future, you'd want to.

But yeah, sorry, I just bring it back to that place of gratefulness and gratitude.

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *So here we are in this country where there are so many reminders of that incident on a faraway beach, so long ago. From placemats to silos, remembrance in so many forms – but what does it all add up to? And what can we take away from all this?*

If Lainie, Lorna and the other nurses had come home, of course none of this would be happening. But instead, through the vicissitudes of war, they didn't, dying unthinkable deaths due to war. The devotion with which the community continues to honour this is deeply moving.

[AUDIO: "Lest we forget" with crowd response]

MEGAN SPENCER: *But I feel the need to get a sense of not only 'why' remembrance is important but what difference it can make...*

Here's Andy Priestner again, the author of 'Remembering Tenko'.

Slide 6

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: I guess emotionally when you look at this story, what comes up for you? I veer between really deep sadness, and incredible admiration. That's me. What about you?

ANDY PRIESTNER: Yeah, I think... It's a weird one for me, because I feel, I get a sort of calm about me when I'm looking back into this stuff? I feel a reassurance that I understand that world and I understand what the message is of that story.

And it is a message about humanity and about how we can't let this happen again. And yet, it keeps happening! And it's --- it's this lack of willingness to retain history and keep it with us and keep it alive that is a massive problem, I think, today. And that's what we should be striving for in our society --- that that knowledge is passed on and kept alive.

And these are real people who died with families. And this happens again and again. And it doesn't seem to make a difference that it keeps happening. And I find that, yeah, deeply depressing! But at the same time, it makes me very passionate about telling the story to people who don't know it. And I do tell people the story.

But I think it's wonderful that you're shining a light on it and bringing people to the story, because I think it's so important that we remember these wartime stories. And yeah, to ensure that they don't happen again, as much as we possibly can influence that.

MEGAN SPENCER: *It's also something I want to ask Christina Twomey about, the historian we heard from earlier. How can we make sense of something that makes no sense?*

Slide 7

[INTERVIEW] MEGAN SPENCER: So my final question to you, Christina, is around the legacy of this story. I mean, is there anything good we can take from it? What is the legacy of these nurses on Radji Beach, do you think?

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: Yeah, that's a good question. What's the legacy of it?

I think I am intrigued by it because Vivian Bullwinkel lives to tell the tale, but tells it in a particular way. And I'm interested in how people incorporate terrible experiences into their lives and keep going. And her capacity to overcome that traumatic experience *is* inspiring.

Slide 8

And there are other women who knew about it as well.

So there's a lot of focus on Vivian Bullwinkel as the survivor. But don't forget, there were other women in the camps --- other nurses --- who had lost their friends and their colleagues. And they carried that knowledge throughout the war. So they were scared that the Japanese would find out that Vivian Bullwinkel had survived and then they'd all be in peril.

Slide 9

So, yes, it's a tragedy for the loss of life of the people who died on the beach, but that bleeds into the rest of the group and their experience of survival. So they carry that with them.

And there's lots of stories about the women who survive, going and visiting the families of the women who died. And telling them what they remembered of them, of their time in Malaya, trying to discuss with the families how things had been.

So, they also paid this debt of honour to their colleagues by visiting and sharing memories of them. That's a very caring thing to do! It must have been a really hard thing, to go and visit a grieving parent and describe what they knew. But they did it! To honour them.

So you know there is hope in the story, in how people try and care for each other afterwards and help families survive it.

MEGAN SPENCER: So it sounds like really that the legacy is kindness and compassion.

CHRISTINA TWOMEY: I think so... And the resilience of those who survived and their capacity to honour their fallen comrades. And their ability to put the past behind them and establish relationships with nurses from the region and try and work for peace.

Because the lesson of war, for people who've lived through it, is often to be active around and argue for peace. And that's what they tried to do when they came back.

MEGAN SPENCER: *There's a saying: "the longer you heal the bigger the scar". What happened on Bangka Island left scars and memories there as well. A Memorial Peace Museum now resides in Muntok, as well as other plaques and monuments on the island dedicated to the nurses and all those who suffered and perished there during World War Two. Local Indigenous peoples were also caught up in the Japanese occupation.*

Slide 10

On the 75th anniversary of the Bangka Island massacre, Elaine's niece Eve Balfour--Ogilvy and her sister travelled to Bangka Island for a very special memorial service and stood on the beach where their aunt died. People from all over the region – including Indonesian nurses – were present.

Slide 11

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Yes it was very emotional. We had three services in one day and then we went out to Radji Beach.

MEGAN SPENCER: Who attended? Were there relatives of the families of the women?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Yes --- quite a lot, quite a lot of family. I think it was about 20 family members and the rest were military people and officials, and lots of girls in the military.

Slide 12

There was a group of nurses from the local hospital – this makes me quite emotional – who came to the beach. And they had their own little service. And they put petals in the water, which was which was very sweet.

And we had trouble getting the wreaths out into the current to carry them. I mean it looked lovely with --- there must have been 10 or 12 large wreaths that were made.

Slide 13

Anyway, we --- my sister Kate and I walked --- we put the wreath in the water and the tide kept pushing it back. So we did it a number of times. And eventually one of the local Indonesian boys came along and pushed it further out.

But I loved the idea of the petals. It was very, very sweet.

MEGAN SPENCER: I would imagine lots of tears, especially on that site?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Oh yes, it was --- we were all in tears.

[Music]

MEGAN SPENCER: Much of your life it sounds like has been involved in practicing remembrance, around the nurses, around your aunt. What do you feel the importance of remembrance is and its role is and its relevance to today especially? Do you have any reflections around that?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Well I do. I think that it's very important that we – that we probably don't do enough of it. It makes us reflective and more conscious of our past and what people have done in to help us live this nice life.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think your aunt Lainie's spirit lives on through active commemoration that you do and that others do? And by those perhaps even listening to this story and taking it in?

EVE BALFOUR--OGILVY: Yes, I do --- I do think that her spirit lives on. And certainly throughout the family, she's made an indelible mark on us. And we all commemorate it.

And I think by talking and remembering, we can continue to be decent people.

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *The Memorial represents a fitting honour to commemorate the nurses who were massacred on Radji Beach, in addition to being an iconic memorial to all women who have served in the Australian Defence Force.*

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *So we're back again, full circle, at the 80th anniversary of the Banka Island massacre in Adelaide. Another 'living memorial' is about to be unveiled by Helen Fischer, president of the South Australian Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust.*

Slide 14

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *I would like to take you around and introduce you to all the elements that are here and give you a little bit of their story in terms of their Radji Beach connection.*

Firstly, on my right are the 22 posts which commemorate each of the nurses who were marched into the sea and shot from behind. The low wall behind the post carries the immortal words of Matron Irene Drummond: "Chin up girls, I'm proud of you and I love you all."

Slide 15

Each of the stainless steel posts carries the name, rank, place of enlistment and date of death and age at death of each of the Australian Army Nursing Service nurses, to ensure that they will always be remembered.

The final post is brass and is dedicated to the sole survivor, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, whose incredible courage led to the massacre coming to light.

[MUSIC: Shakahuchi]

[BANGKA DAY AUDIO] HELEN FISCHER: *The Memorial is --- where we're sitting --- is the physical and spiritual centre of the Playing Fields as it was intended, and it will continue to be a living memorial to the nurses and to all women who have served.*

[AUDIO: Flags waving in breeze, flagpoles]

MEGAN SPENCER: *In this podcast you've heard me mention 'On Radji Beach', one of the seminal books written about the story of the AANS nurses in wartime Singapore and beyond.*

Slide 16

And I'm a bit blown away because Ian Shaw, its author is here! So I 'fangirl' him a bit and ask him for a quick interview.

IAN SHAW: Hi, my name's Ian Shaw and I wrote a book called 'On Radji Beach' about what happened to the nurses.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Ian tells me that in the past he's attended a number of these annual ceremonies at the Playing Fields. For many --- like him --- coming here is almost a pilgrimage.*

MEGAN SPENCER: So you've come from Canberra today to be here, is that right?

IAN SHAW: Yes we drove over --- headed out on Thursday and arrived here Friday night. And yeah --- we missed the last couple of years because COVID and we were determined not to miss the 80th anniversary.

But the enthusiasm and the commitment of the people involved --- it inspires me every year. And I go back, recharged.

MEGAN SPENCER: It was quite emotional too. I think one of the most powerful things today was when Helen Fischer, the President of this organisation, read out every single name of every single nurse and told the story.

IAN SHAW: Yeah, it was. And when I wrote about them they became human beings to me? Because I read their letters and their diaries and lots of official dispatches from the hospitals they served with. So you get a feel for who they were as human beings. But hearing Helen today, just the simple, "I have a name. I have a date. I was a person".

Yeah, very, very powerful stuff.

MEGAN SPENCER: What do you think the legacy is of the nurses?

IAN SHAW: I think the legacy is the story of: young women who put something bigger ahead of themselves. The whole story's not about "me as an individual". It's about us as part of a much larger grouping.

And again I take that and think, "Wow!" I hope --- I would like to think that if I was ever in that situation, I'd do the same thing. I'm not certain I would though. So that's what I take from it.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Today's service will also leave a lasting impression on Matt Sloan, especially the new memorial that's been installed to honour the nurses of Banka Island, including his family member, Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy.*

MATTHEW SLOAN: I think this afternoon, the big thing is, it's had a bigger impact for me being here today because especially with this being the 80th anniversary. I think that's sort of the big part, you know, the fact that I literally live about a kilometre across the road?

You know, knowing that the poles are forever going to be here now? You know that that memorial to Elaine? Literally across the road for me!

So yeah, even saying it now, like I can feel, you know --- it's a bit tingly – you know, my hair's sort of raising up?

Yeah, I guess the legacy for me is, yeah, certainly the fact that they're still being remembered 80 years later. So it's just a really good feeling, yeah.

[AUDIO: Catafalque Party drum beat]

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *And now from Lorna Fairweather's family, John, Liz and Jill.*

Slide 18

JOHN FURLER: What would I take away from today? Well she lives on, you know, in my memory of my mum, in the nurses in our family, it's terrific.

Ah, but a sense of endurance and bearing things and going on.

LIZ HOLZNER: Her legacy, for me, is that she helped me grow as a person, you know? Just understanding what happened to her and the way others dealt with it has --- and reflecting on that --- has helped me develop as a person.

MEGAN SPENCER: That's pretty amazing from someone you never met or knew?

LIZ HOLZNER: Yeah, for sure.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think remembrance is important? Does it help with healing?

JOHN FURLER: Well, yeah --- openness, remembrance, honouring, acknowledging --- they're all important to healing, you know? Remembering people, it's critical. Memory...

LIZ HOLZNER: and I think the other thing is, if you --- just the participation in an event like this with people who you wouldn't --- I wouldn't normally --- have really anything to do with, is --- you know --- it opens your mind. And seeing the way other groups of people celebrate and honour outside of the family, is yeah, I think good.

JOHN FURLER: Sharing has been – has been good today.

JILL DAVIDSON: And acknowledging is huge, I think, and acknowledging in every sense. It was part of history, and it's so important to acknowledge that history, of --- whether it be of one incident or 60,000 years of living.

JOHN DAVIDSON: Sure Megan, I'm John Davidson. I'm husband of Jill Davidson, who was Jill Furler, the niece of Lorna Fairweather. And I'm here today as her partner.

And I was moved by the ceremony --- you could not help but be moved by the ceremony. It was done with great honour and dignity. And it's great to see that these heroes and victims of war are recognised in this way. That's my take away.

Slide 19

MEGAN SPENCER: *As the event winds down, I finally find Helen Fischer. She hasn't stopped – she and her team have been working round the clock on this event for weeks. I ask Helen what she thinks the legacy of the Bangka Island nurses might be?*

HELEN FISCHER: We need these stories. It's not just that: these people go through an enormous amount of stress and strain and training! And yet, you know, often we can sort of take it for granted that that's what they do?

It's also women's stories tend to be lost in the telling. The stories are written by 'the victors', generally, and, you know, you don't often know what small players or smaller groups of women have done. Very often we don't hear until a very long time afterwards, and quite often after they've gone.

So, you know, it is important that we tell young women that these are the sorts of legacies that they can achieve. And it's one of courage, honesty, integrity --- spunk! You know, it is just amazing what they showed!

And you can see from the families here, and you know --- some of them are now first, second, third removed --- they still take an interest, they still come along, they still shed tears. And this is just so important.

It's important to them --- but it's important to young women.

[MUSIC: 'Largo', from the New World Symphony, sung by the Peninsula Women's Chorus].

[VOCAL ACTOR reads]:

"The Australian Army Nursing Service Pledge of Service

*I pledge myself loyally
to serve my King and Country
and to maintain the honour and efficiency
of the Australian Army Nursing Service.*

*I will do all in my power
to alleviate the suffering of
the sick and wounded, sparing no
effort to bring them comfort of body
and peace of mind.*

*I will work in unity and
comradeship with my fellow nurses.*

*I will be ready to give assistance
to those who need my help,
and will abstain from any action
which may bring sorrow
and suffering to others.*

*At all times I will endeavour
to uphold the highest traditions of
Womanhood and of the Profession
of which I am Part."*

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *So as we come to the end of this wartime story, it's fitting to end with the Peninsula Women's Chorus singing this beautiful choral version of Dvořák's 'Largo', from the 'New World Symphony'.*

Slide 21

The Chorus was first to perform it in contemporary times. It was originally arranged by Margaret Dryburgh and Norah Chambers, two musically talented English prisoners who were interned with the Australian nurses in the Palembang prison camp.

Slide 22

In the midst of the misery composer Margaret and conductor Norah organised a choir in the camp, which included three of the Australian Army nurses, one them being Betty Jeffrey. They performed regular concerts to "uplift their souls" and keep up morale. The acapella music was so exquisite that the Japanese soldiers would sit and listen as well, captivated alongside their prisoners.

Slide 23

Like so many of the women in the camps, Margaret Dryburgh died before the war ended. This song has survived and become a musical memorial to the horrors of war and to those who live through it.

This podcast is dedicated to the 65 nurses of the Vyner Brooke and their families -- those nurses who made it home, and those who didn't. Also to Mrs Carrie Betteridge, the elderly civilian woman who died alongside the 21 nurses on the Radji Beach.

Slide 25

This program is also dedicated to all nurses and women of service.

[END CREDITS]

MEGAN SPENCER: *'The Sudden Storm' is a podcast about the Australian Army nurses of Singapore produced for the Virtual War Memorial Australia Schools Program.*

Slide 26

Production of this podcast has been made possible through a grant from the South Australian Department for Education.

Speaking today were:

Professor Christina Twomey

Helen Fischer

Andy Priestner

Ian Shaw

Eve Balfour-Ogilvy

Matthew Sloan

Liz Allwood

Jill Davidson

John Furler

Liz Holzner and John Davidson

Ray Hartigan, Sue Schubert, Chester Warren and Renmark RSL Committee members

Ben Files

Fletcher Hayes

Anja Tassios

Stephen Files

Deb Axon

Peter Magarey

Carolyn Wood

Les Webb and Jack Fran

You also heard the voices of:

Lt. Col Karl Haas, retired

Annie Hastwell

Sienna Bigg

Heath Bigg

Sharyn Roberts

Colin Patterson and Carolyn Patterson

Grateful thanks to each speaker for their deep insights and wise words --- and for their support of this program.

'The Sudden Storm' was narrated and produced by me, Megan Spencer, for the Virtual War Memorial Australia.

It was written by Annie Hastwell and Megan Spencer.

Additional writing and research by David Rafferty.

Interviews, research, sound recording and sound mix by Megan Spencer.

Additional research Annie Hastwell.

The Banka Day 80th Anniversary Ceremony sound recorded by Jonathan Heath from Amplify This 200 Productions and used with kind permission.

Music is by Dr. Yuki Tanaka playing Shakuhachi, recorded by Rod Waterman. Also Chris Latham and the composers and musicians of The Diggers Requiem, and, the Peninsula Women's Chorus --- many, many thanks to them for their kind generosity.

Music is also by Endurance & Kris Keogh, and Les FM.

Sound mastering is by Kris Keogh.

Archival sound is courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, used with kind permission

Special thanks to Sharyn Roberts, David Rafferty, Peter Williams and the Virtual War Memorial Australia team, and to the VWMA Schools Program Reference Group.

Special thanks also to Helen Fischer and the SA Womens Memorial Playing Fields Trust, and Jonathan Heath; to the Fairweather family and Marcia Denning; the relatives of Elaine Balfour--Ogilvy; Renmark RSL, Kathryn Sanwick & the Peninsula Women's Chorus, The Flowers of Peace, Chester Warren, Annette Crozier and to our generous vocal actors.

For a full list of acknowledgements and credits please download the Show Notes that accompany this episode on the Virtual War Memorial website in the Education menu.

The opinions expressed in this podcast are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Virtual War Memorial Australia.

.....

If this program raises any issues for you and you need support, please feel free to call:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800

1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732, or

Open Arms Veterans & Families Counselling on 1800 011 046

.....

The Virtual War Memorial Australia is Australia's largest online war memorial with over 1.5 million records. Visit and contribute today at vwma.org.au -- and find out more about its resources for teaching and learning.

This podcast has been made on the traditional lands of the Kurna people, Wurundjeri Woi--wurrung people and the Seven Tribes of the First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee Region of South Australia.

My name's Megan Spencer and thank you for listening to this wartime story.

End of Part 06 of 06 and end of program.