

Transcript Part 6 of 7
'Walking in Two Worlds: The WWI story of Ngarrindjeri Anzacs Cyril & Rufus Rigney'
Episode 03 of the Schools Program podcast series for the
Virtual War Memorial Australia
Megan Spencer © 2023

Part 06 (duration 30:11)

MEGAN SPENCER (narration): *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are advised that this podcast contains references to and the names and voices of people who have passed away.*

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO]

DONNA HANDKE (NOW MELLORS): Why have we not learnt from the outcome of something so horrendous? Millions of hearts broken, for what? But I thank them and I honour them, for their courage and will to never give up. And I always will remember them.

MEGAN SPENCER: *At the start of the 21st Century, the remembrance story of the Rigney brothers from Raukkan, took a surprising turn*

Though the service of the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs was well understood within the Ngarrindejri community, it still wasn't that well known or recognised by many people outside of it.

But that began to change, 85 years after the end of World War One.

A group of Year 12 history students from Mount Barker High School in South Australia took a trip to Camp Coorong on Ngarrindjeri country with their teacher, Julie Reece.

Each of Julie's students had to pick a specific World War One soldier to research for a major project.

One student – a young woman called Donna Handke – was struggling to find a soldier and a research topic that captured her interest.

As part of the camp Julie's school group took a tour of Raukkan. The tour included a visit to the Raukkan Church with the stained glass windows and commemorative plaque which lists all of the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs. For Donna, that moment that changed everything.

Here's her former teacher, Julie Reece.

JULIE REECE: And of course as you know, that beautiful little chapel has all of the commemorative memorabilia of the Ngarrindjeri soldiers. And in goes Donna, and she sees the plaque on the side of the wall with the Ngarrindjeri 21 names.

And she was so excited! she said, "Jules, Jules! I've got my soldiers there are these Aboriginal guys who went off to the First World War".

And I was really embarrassed. I mean, I was her history teacher, but I did not know about their story. I thought, "*Holy Moly! Here I have been teaching all these years*", and I had didn't realise -

MEGAN SPENCER: - Did you realize that there were Indigenous soldiers in World War One?

JULIE REECE: No, I wasn't! I didn't!

MEGAN SPENCER: So you discovered that at the same time Donna did?

JULIE REECE: Absolutely! A Year 12 student showed that to me. And to my shame, as a history teacher, I am embarrassed to admit that! That in 2003 I was unaware of the Indigenous involvement in the First World War - in any of the wars to be perfectly honest! And I'd put myself up as this "great history teacher" - you know, what a load of bollocks! You know, how could you not know that?

But it was... I mean I have to take personal responsibility for that, obviously. But I think it was a sign of the time and the system that we're in, where there was just total non-acknowledgement of this story.

And surprise, surprise! It goes along with everything to do with Indigenous history. So it was an eye opener for me. And so in a sense, Donna, and I began the journey together

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO 2004 CAMERA TAPES OF HIGH SCHOOL TRIP TO EUROPE]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Two years earlier, Julie had taken a small group of young people from Mount Barker High School on a trip overseas to visit war battlegrounds and memorial sites in France and Belgium. There was another tour planned for 2004 and Donna was going to be part of that trip.*

From that trip to Raukkan, Donna had chosen Rufus Rigney as the soldier for her research project. She was hoping to be able to find and see his grave when she visited Harlebeke Cemetery in Belgium the following year.

As Donna got further into her research, she had an idea: what if she could collect some soil from Ngarrindjeri land and take it over to Belgium to leave at Rufus's gravesite? It would be a way to bring some of Rufus's home to his final resting place.

Julie, Donna and the history class gathered some soil from a few different places around the Coorong and local area. With the support of Ngarrindjeri elders Aunty Doreen Kartinyeri and Uncle Matthew Rigney from Camp Coorong, they took the soil over to Belgium.

After locating Rufus's burial site in the Harelbeke Cemetery, they scattered the soil on Rufus's grave in a small, quiet ceremony. The moment was recorded and videotaped.

Here's Donna Handke back then, speaking that day at Rufus Rigney's grave.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO 2004 CAMERA TAPES]

DONNA HANDKE (NOW MELLORS): Today we commemorate all soldiers who lost their lives on the battlefields of Flanders and in particular the Indigenous Australians – veterans - from the lands of the Ngarrindjeri people of South Australia.

By bringing the soil from the country of his birth we will connect Rufus Gordon Rigney with the land he left and died for.

Our "Remembrance 2004" group hope this simple yet symbolic act will be seen as an act of reconciliation for with our Aboriginal Anzacs, and highlight their story, not only with their own country, but also with the globe.

MEGAN SPENCER: *The school group played music selected by Aunt Doreen Kartinyeri and draped the Ngarrindjeri flag - designed by Uncle Matthew Rigney - around Rufus's grave. And, with a special dispensation from the European Parliament, they took soil from Rufus's gravesite and brought it back home to Rufus's family.*

Julie told me she thought that the whole thing would end there, but Aunty Doreen Kartinyeri – who had worked so hard and long to bring recognition to the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs, with her research and book - had bigger plans.

JULIE REECE: ... It got bigger than Ben Hur once we came home from that tour, after we bought the soil back from Rufus's grave, and we gave the soil to Aunty Dodo.

But no, no, no! She wasn't going to have this as an end point, not one bit!

And she was passionate about everybody knowing that her uncles were there too - that her uncles' stories were just as valid, if not more so, than all of the stories that were retold over and over and over and every ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day. And they hadn't had a voice.

And she wanted to have this big event.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO FROM ANZAC 2005 COORONG CEREMONY]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Which brings us full circle to the start of this podcast and that extraordinary community event and ceremony for ANZAC Day in 2005, where Aunty Doreen scattered the soil from Rufus's grave in Belgium in the waters of the Coorong.*

It was organised by Aunty Doreen Kartinyeri, elder Uncle Matthew Rigney and Julie Reece with the support of the RSL. Here's Aunty Doreen speaking in front of the crowd that day...

[ARCHIVAL VIDEO 2005 ANZAC CEREMONY AT THE COORONG]

AUNTY DOREEN KARTINYERI: Julie, what can I say, but thank you is not really big enough of how I feel.

When you first contacted me and you saw *the 'Ngarrindjeri Anzac'* book I wrote, I never for one minute dreamt that something like this was going to come out of it.

That I could go and tell you about the history of the feather farm made by the Ngarrindjeri women but not today, I'll do that another day! [Laughter]

Thank you. [Sound of camera and applause].

MEGAN SPENCER: It was attended by Rufus's relatives, members of the Ngarrindjeri community, veterans, members of the RSL and Defence Force, Julie and the student whose high school project kick-started the process, Donna Handke,

[ARCHIVAL TV AUDIO FROM 2005 ANZAC DAY CEREMONY AT COORONG]

DONNA HANDKE (MELLORS): Um, emotionally it was the hugest thing I've done in my life. It really meant a lot. And to be here today and to finally get to see this all end. It's beyond words. It's unbelievably! [Laughs]

I don't know - it's good.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Back on his home Country at the Coorong, Uncle Frank Lampard was also there that day.*

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: Yeah, I was, and oh, that was huge! Huge.

You know, the ground has this amazing capacity to -

MEGAN SPENCER: - Embrace?

UNCLE FRANK LAMPARD: Embrace you and take you in. Do you know what I mean? Yeah!

And so what you couldn't help but do is have this incredible running pulse in your body about what was actually happening. And it's so great to have at least some of their ground brought back in the same way as we took some over to spread where they're interred. That was just such a brilliant exchange!

And highly emotional!

MEGAN SPENCER: *Aunty Verna's mum Edith, the niece of Rufus and Cyril Rigney, was part of it, too.*

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: I wasn't there for that. My mum was. Even to say it was emotional is sort of an understatement?

Because, I'm not sure that a lot of people understand how it works? You know, just to have something that was there where they were, or where you know, came from where they had been? Um, meant a lot.

MEGAN SPENCER: And it was soil going back into Country wasn't it, in both instances?

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: Yeah soil being - from one place to the other, and then back again. So you know, the significance of it, you know - they probably trod on that soil.

MEGAN SPENCER: *For Julie Reece these experiences were the beginning of a new chapter in her life. Learning about the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs with Donna, and getting to know elders in the community, caused her to re-examine her understanding of Australian history and the ANZAC story.*

MEGAN SPENCER: So, did knowing that First Nations soldiers from Australia went fight to fight in World War One, did that change your perspective on things like ANZAC and the broader history that you knew up until that point?

JULIE REECE: Yes, it did. Because I had a sort of fuzzy kind of 'romantic' version of what ANZAC was. I had immersed myself in that for years.

And so, you know, I had fallen into the trap - which the Anzac industry does - which was [to] romanticise and glorify what I thought we were remembering.

When I discovered this story as a teacher and as a friend of Donna's in a sense, it made me question the whole mythology of it. Because it made me see the exclusivity of it. It made me see and start to question more realistically, I think, the long-standing way in which the ANZAC story has been told. And, I'd fallen into the trap of, I guess, the Australian jingoistic approach to it all. And just – it was too simple!

And by learning this story, it I've realised that, in some one sense, generations have been absolutely scammed on this, in many ways! We haven't been told the truth about it. We haven't been told the truth about a lot of it.

And the more I started to read more widely and expand my own knowledge on my own war history, instead of the two-dimensional sort of 'Paul Hogan Anzac' view of it... It has a very narrow version of the story. It has part of that story, I agree. But it's a very narrow version.

And it excludes all of the negative stuff that affected our First Nations people, after that massive event called "The Great War".

MEGAN SPENCER: *But this journey of commemoration doesn't end here.*

Cyril and Rufus were just teenagers when they died. And teenagers are a big part of this new chapter in the story of the Rigney brothers.

We've heard today about high school student Donna Handke and her discovery of the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs' story changing the way she viewed the Australian ANZAC story. It became much bigger than the "bronzed Aussie larrikan" stereotype. It took on a whole new significance and meaning for Donna which turned into commemorative action.

And then there is Victor Koolmatrie, Aunty Verna's son. We read him reading from Rufus's War Service Record earlier in this podcast. And as far as commemorating Rufus and Cyril Rigney goes, he also took things to a new level.

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: I'm Victor Koolmatrie. I currently live still on Ngarrindjeri country. My relationship to Uncle Rufus and Uncle Cyril is they're my great-great uncles. They're my grandmother's mother's brothers.

The fact that I'm related to someone - to these people - to my two great, great uncles. It is something I get to carry around. Even when I'm driving around, like to work.

It's not something I revisit, but it's it's a feeling, knowing that, you know, being related to the strong men... It helps you! Like it helps me sometimes!

But, even though I don't think of it [often], now and then when I do, it's a strength. That it's just... It's deep.

MEGAN SPENCER: Um, is there a pride in there too?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Yeah, yeah! There's a lot of pride in that.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Through the process of the 2004-2005 soil exchange, Julie and Donna had formed new friendships with relatives of the Rigney brothers. And what began as a school project at Mount Barker High began to evolve into something much bigger and deeper.*

Soon Julie and Uncle Matthew Rigney were planning for another trip to memorials sites in Europe. Uncle Matt Rigney called it 'Connecting Spirits'. This time, the trip – to take place in 2006 - would include students from other schools. It would also include a group of Ngarrindjeri, who, for the first time, planned to commemorate their own, the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs, in situ, in Belgium.

Aunty Verna took the place of her mum Edith when she couldn't go due to ill health.

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: I remember, I went and saw my Mum. And I spoke to her about it. And she got quite emotional. And she said to me, "*Oh, you go, and you see where they were, you see where Uncle Rufus is.*" And, and yeah, she cried.

And she said, "*You're going to see something that I didn't get to see, or my mum didn't get to see*". Or her mum didn't get to see". And she said, "*And that means everything*", you know, so?

Yeah, it meant everything.

MEGAN SPENCER: *Aunty Verna's son, Victor Koolmatrice, was 16 at the time – the same age as Rufus when he left for war. I asked Victor what it was like being involved in that very first Connecting Spirits trip in 2006.*

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Well, at first, I have to say as well, like I wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for Donna Handke and Julie Reece, for starters.

When the news - we received news that they found Uncle Rufus's grave - just how Mum told me? Even though like – I'd heard stories! And a lot of times it's something that wasn't really talked about? It was too much pain?

MEGAN SPENCER: Losing them?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Losing them and not knowing?

I just felt compelled to honour them. You know, to dance over there, the whole time it felt like we were just ramping up to something.

Something big.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO VIDEO - 2005 FUNDRAISER DVD FOR CONECTING SPIRITS TRIP]

My name is Victor Koolmatrrie. My two great-great uncles, Cyril and Rufus Rigney, fought and died for Ausralia in WWI. I'm 16 years-old which is the same age as my Uncle Rufus was when he went to servie. I think thatis pretty amazing."

[SFX PLANE TAKING OFF]

MEGAN SPENCER: *After months of fundraising and researching soldiers, a group of 13 students and 9 adults left Adelaide on the 6th of November 2006 for the memorial sites of Europe. Everyone on the trip had specific soldiers they would commemorate – Indigenous and non-Indigenous soldiers alike.*

Travelling with a group that included his family, Ngarrindjeri students and other high school students and teachers from Meningie Area School and Birdwood High, Victor had a special role in the commemorations. First, he would read a dedication to Private Cyril Rigney at the Menin Gate and later would perform a traditional Ngarrandjeri dance at Rufus Rigney's grave at Harlebeke Cemetery.

For Victor, a lot was riding on this. As far as anyone knew, it was the first time any members of Rufus's family had visited his grave and this site of his burial in person. Same with seeing Cyril's name on the Menin Gate. They had been waiting a long time to come to this special place.

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Leading up to dancing; the commemoration for Uncle Cyril hit me the hardest. Honestly, it broke me.

I was standing there in front of people that I've now become friends with a complete mess. And I couldn't look at anyone. It was just like, "I have to get through this?"

What I felt was *utter* sadness. That day that came from deep, for me. Like it was just from my core.

Just this explosion of emotion that, not since then I've actually felt, to tell you the truth.

That day helped me prepare for that dance. Because if I didn't let all that out, I wouldn't have got through. I needed that emotional release?

And after that I was a soldier.

MEGAN SPENCER: November in Belgium is chilly. But Victor went to his great-great-uncle's gravesite with his skin painted traditional Ngarrindjeri way.

In front of his classmates, family, teachers, Belgian and Australian officials, locals - and the local media as well - he performed a dance that has been performed by many generations of Ngarrindjeri men before him.

As everyone watched the world stopped turning.

[ARCHIVAL WTV NEWS FOOTAGE: VICTOR KOOLMATRIE SPEAKING ON WTV BELGIUM TELEVISION: 22.11.2006]

I did it to show what sort of animals that he would have seen, what sort of what traditional dances he would have seen. And um, you know like, let him know his people were behind him, and that you know, he can rest in peace now.

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Both days were cold. I never felt the cold dancing. I still remember being - my cousin Vern helped me getting paint on.

I remember stepping off that bus and not feeling anything. Not anything, but none of the cold. Nothing else mattered I was so tuned in with what I had to do. I couldn't see anyone. Honestly I could not see anyone.

Like I just - I felt strong. I felt so connected. Yeah. It was just - it was one of the powerful times of my life... Where I got to celebrate two young men, away from home.

And I did my best, as I'm trying my best now, to commemorate them and honour them.

[MORE ARCHIVAL WTV AUDIO OF VICTOR DANCING AT HARELBEKE CEMETERY TO HONOUR UNCLE RUFUS RIGNEY]

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Yeah, it was just massive! [Laughs]

MEGAN SPENCER: Well I mean it must have been a massive responsibility going over to represent all of your ancestors and your community and family at this one place. That must have been a huge thing on your shoulders at that time?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Like what I was saying - I know I wasn't a 'soldier'. But that day, yeah, I was a soldier –

MEGAN SPENCER: You had a duty?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Yeah! I had I had to honour these these men.

MEGAN SPENCER: Your ancestors?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: My ancestors. [That's] all I'm trying to do. Right now.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you imagine – I imagine when I read their story - what it must have been like for them to live not just 'off Country', but in another country so far away and very different in many ways to what they knew at Raukkan.

Have you thought about that and reflected on that too, what that might have been like for them?

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: Yeah! The feeling they would have had, like... We, Ngarrindjeri people and Aboriginal people; there's a sense of humour.

And without a doubt, I know they would have found so much humour in some of the things - especially because I get some of that humour from my grandmother as well. So, I know they would have had plenty of laughs over there, even though they're in the midst of shrapnel...

And then on the flip side of that where just the thought that Uncle Rufus was in a shell hole looking up at the sky and not recognising those stars. That sky?

He wouldn't have known that he wouldn't have made it home but even though he was alone? His ancestors were there as well.

[SOUNDS OF THE COORONG]

VICTOR KOOLMATRIE: What what I did interpret through the dance was animals, sights, maybe some sounds as well. It was just connecting home and him through dance. And some of the things I was saying was, talking about home. *"Home's going good"*, you know what I mean?

And then, *"It's time to rest"*.

As I was saying, I don't think about them too often. But when I do, I know they're with me.

[MUSIC]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Victor's proud mum Aunty Verna Koolmatric was there. I ask her about her memories of that day, too.*

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: We didn't think he would do it. It was freezing cold! But he wanted to do it, he didn't want to be dressed up - he wanted to be dressed the traditional way and painted the way he should have been.

And, and yeah he performed.

And it was - it was, it was touching! It was.. It was something that you felt like he was able to do that for Uncle Rufus and Uncle Cyril. But, you know, by extension all of the other Australian soldiers - Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal?

There was this ceremony being performed that would have been performed in in Australia, over many thousands of years. And now it's happening there, you know?

You almost get the feeling that, you know, they all took some comfort from it.

MEGAN SPENCER: Do you think there was a sense of healing that went along with this ceremony and commemoration at that time?

AUNTY VERNA KOOLMATRIE: Yeah, I do think there was a sense of healing. I mean, that's what it felt like. It felt like something that was just so truly special that you can't put a name to it. And, you know, there are no words for it.

But you feel it.

And the fact that, it was, it was done on behalf of not just Victor and our family, but on behalf of the Ngarrindjeri, you know.. So you just felt like it was something being performed that Rufus and Cyril had been a part of, you know?

Yeah, so it, it felt like it was 'full circle'.

MEGAN SPENCER: *For Julie Reece, it was an unforgettable day as well.*

JULIE REECE: I felt just so proud of him. And I just kept looking at his face, it just kept on going back and forward to the headstone. And he was totally focused on that headstone.

And [gets emotional]. It was a connection that was real for him? Um, at that moment, and -

[MORE AUDIO OF WTV BELGIAN TV REPORT OF VICTOR DANCING]

JULIE REECE: Everybody felt it in their gut.

[VICTOR AT 16, SPEAKING ON WTV BELGIAN TV REPORT]

"It's about lost souls. And we're trying to find them and commemorate them and you know like, tell the story about how the soldier is here, and how he died. So we're trying to connect our souls and their souls together."

[MUSIC: LOST SOUL SONG STARTS]

MEGAN SPENCER: *Victor and the story were on Belgian TV that night, but he doesn't remember seeing the cameras while he was dancing.*

Later the whole Connecting Spirits group watched the story back at a pub. An old lady who was there recognised Victor off the telly and hugged him.

Victor's words from the news inspired the song Lost Soul by famous Scottish/Australian folk musician Eric Bogle. After they got home, Julie convinced Eric to come out of retirement to write a song about the Ngarrindjeri Anzacs and Connecting Spirits.

Eric's beautiful song Lost Soul was recorded and sung by proud Ngarrindjeri woman Rita Lindsay and Flo Bourke – both students as well on that 2006 trip.

[MUSIC: CHORUS OF *LOST SOUL*]

MEGAN SPENCER: It's on the '*Connecting Spirits*' album that they recorded in 2009, which grew out the project.

Rita and Flo both wrote, recorded and sang original songs.

It's a beautiful 17-track musical monument to all of the soldiers they honoured on that landmark 2006 trip.

End of Part 06 of transcript. Please go to the final part, Part 07.