

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Australians asked to share stories of Bangka Island World War II Nurses

In collaboration with the Australian College of Nursing, the ACN Foundation is calling for family, friends and colleagues to share stories and reflections of Lieutenant Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel AO, MBE, ARRC, ED, FNM, FRCNA and the 21 nurses who lost their lives at the Bangka Island Massacre in 1942 in one of the worst atrocities of World War II.

ACN CEO, Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward, said that it is important that the Bangka Island nurse's courage, leadership and professional skills continue to have a legacy in Australia today.

"We are keeping the memory of these nurses alive by encouraging all family, friends and colleagues of these heroic women to contact us and share their stories," Adjunct Professor Ward said.

"The women endured exceptionally trying conditions in the face of death. Even in their final moments, they stayed true to their commitment to care for others, with several supporting their injured colleagues walk into the water before their tragic death.

"We want to ensure that their legacy is not forgotten, and that Australians will continue to be inspired by them.

"It's important we link the past, present and future for us to remember the sacrifice, service and leadership of these Australian nurses and their role within the Australian Army Nursing Service," Adjunct Professor Ward said.

To learn more, or share a story or reflection, please visit <https://foundation.acn.edu.au/bullwinkel>

If you have an artefact related to Vivian Bullwinkel or one of the 21 fallen nurses of the SS Vyner Brooke or the Bankga Island massacre, please contact ACN.

The stories may be included in a commemorative book that will be launched at the unveiling of the sculpture of Lieutenant Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel at the Australian War Memorial later this year.

#### For more information:

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## **Background**

### **About the sinking of the SS Vyner Brooke and the Bangka Island massacre**

65 Australian Army Nursing Service nurses were evacuated from Singapore on the SS Vyner Brooke due to the pending Japanese invasion. Twelve died when the ship was bombed in the Bangka Strait shortly after leaving port.

Twenty-two of the group made their way to the nearby shores at Bangka Island, where they became victims of one of the worst atrocities of the war. The nurses were ordered to walk into the sea and were machine-gunned from behind in what is now known as the Bangka Island Massacre.

When Japanese soldiers massacred the group, Lieutenant Colonel Bullwinkel was struck by a bullet and pretended to be dead before realising she was the sole survivor. After hiding with a wounded soldier, whom she also cared for, for twelve days, she surrendered and spent three and half years in captivity as a Prisoner of War.

### **About the Bangka Island Nurses - Listed by State**

#### **New South Wales**

##### **Sister Kathleen Margaret Neuss**

Sister Kathleen 'Kath' Neuss was born in Mollongghip, Victoria, in 1911 and moved to New South Wales when she was 18 months old. Her family lived in the small town known as Inverell. She was one of six siblings and often travelled to school by horse.

Sister Neuss originally wanted to be a schoolteacher but trained as a private nurse in Inverell before being trained at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney.

Sister Neuss was gravely injured in the bombing of the SS Vyner Brooke but made it alive to Radji Beach. One of her last acts was to give her lifejacket life jacket to nurse Pat Gunther, who washed up on another island and eventually survived the war.

She was 31 when she died on Bangka Island

##### **Sister Dorothy Gwendoline 'Buddy' Elmes**

Sister Dorothy 'Buddy' Elmes was born in Armidale, Victoria, in 1914 and was often known as 'Buddy' to her friends. She spent most of her life in Melbourne and Chestnut and was often described as outgoing, confident and with a quirky sense of humour.

In 1935 she began training as a nurse at Corowa Community Hospital, where she graduated four years later and was described as 'one of our best trainees' by her Matron.

She was 27 when she died on Bangka Island

##### **Sister Florence Aubin Salmon**

Sister Florence Aubin Salmon was born in Sydney in October 1915 and lived in Sydney and Bathurst before her deployment overseas.

Aside from her family connections and her brother, Leonard, who was also in the Australian Army through with the 2/12th Field Ambulance, little is known about Sister Salmon.

She was 26 when she died on Bangka Island

**Sister Esther Sarah Jean 'Stewie' Stewart**

Sister Esther Sara Jean 'Stewie' Stewart was born on 15 October 1904 in Brisbane, Queensland.

Sources say that she lived in Coolangatta for a period of her life before moving down to Sydney to work as a nurse.

She began training as a nurse at Diamantina Hospital in Brisbane before completing her training at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney.

Commonly known by her family and friends as 'Jean' or 'Stewie,' she was very strong in her Christian faith and was a devout Presbyterian.

She was 37 when she died on Bangka Island

**Sister Nancy Harris**

Sister Harris was born in Armidale, NSW, on 15 January 1913. After moving to North Sydney with family, she was trained as a nurse at the Royal North Shore Hospital. She later worked at The Coast Hospital before enlisting in the Army.

She was well known as a traveller and was recorded travelling just before the war to Fiji, China, and Japan.

She was 29 when she died on Bangka Island

**Sister Joyce Ada Bridge**

Sister Joyce Ada Bridge was born in July 1907 in Scone, NSW.

She was well-known as a 'typical country girl' who took pride in her work as a nurse, often noted by family, friends and colleagues to always have a smile on her face.

Dancing was a passion of hers, having been noted several times enjoying local dances across her hometown several times. As she got older, she was known to enjoy various active sports, including tennis, swimming, and golf, when she was not working.

She was 34 when she died on Bangka Island

**Sister Mona Margaret Anderson Tait**

Sister Mona Tait was born in Booval, Queensland, in February 1915. Soon after the birth of her sister Auriel in 1917, the family moved to Newcastle, NSW.

She began training at Cessnock District Hospital in the Hunter Valley and, once graduated, moved to Canberra. She was the Sister in charge of the x-ray department at Canberra Hospital for three years before she enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service.

She was 27 when she died on Bangka Island

### **Sister Janet 'Jenny' Kerr**

Sister Janet 'Jenny' Kerr was born in August 1910 in Monteagle, NSW. Known as 'Jenny' to her friends and colleagues, she was described as a 'no-nonsense girl' who was well-known and held in high esteem by her community.

Nursing was a family affair for the Kerrs, with Jenny following her mother into the profession. She was trained at St George's Hospital in Kogarah, Sydney and was a theatre sister at the hospital for many years.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Bullwinkel, after her return from war, Sister Kerr was the first nurse to note that the enemy forces had killed the male survivors that washed up on Bangka Island, saying, "Bully, they have murdered them all."

She was 31 when she died on Bangka Island

### **Victoria**

#### **Sister Rosetta Joan Wight**

Sister Rosetta Joan Wight was born in Fish Creek, Victoria, in December 1908. She was one of four children and lived on a farm in a small rural town east of Melbourne for much of her life.

Archives have shown that Sister Wight was a nurse by profession in Melbourne and passed her Nurses Board exams while at Bendigo Hospital in 1935.

In the bombing of the SS Vyner Brooke, Sister Wight was one of the worst injured, suffering shrapnel wounds through to the bone across her lower body.

She was 33 when she died on Bangka Island

#### **Sister Clarice Isobel Halligan**

Sister Clarice Halligan was born in Ballarat, Victoria, in September 1904. She was one of eight children and the first of the siblings to die. They lived in Ballarat for their father's work before moving to Kew, a suburb in Melbourne.

She is reported to have had a carefree childhood along the Yarra River with her siblings, with swimming, eating ice cream and exploring the Kew Mental Asylum, favourites of the family.

Sister Halligan was passionate about nursing from a young age, with her family still retaining many of the certificates of her training.

She was 37 when she died on Bangka Island

#### **Sister Mary Elizabeth 'Beth' Cuthbertson**

Sister Mary 'Beth' Cuthbertson was born in March 1910 in Stirling, South Australia.

Little is known about Sister Cuthbertson, aside from growing up in Ballarat and being trained as a nurse at Ballarat Base Hospital before her departure to Malaya as part of the Australian Army Nursing Service.

She was 31 when she died on Bangka Island

### **South Australia**

#### **Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvie**

Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvie was a confident and positive person who enjoyed singing and swimming. In the sinking of the SS Vyner Brooke, she volunteered to stay on board until the very last minute to ensure all others were safely evacuated to lifeboats.

She was 30 when she was killed on Bangka Island.

#### **Sister Florence Casson**

Known as 'Flo' to her friends and colleagues, Lieutenant Florence Casson was one of the 21 nurses killed by enemy forces in the Bangka Island Massacre.

Flo was one of the nurses severely injured in the bombing of the SS Vyner Brooke but was able to escape the sinking ship with support from her nursing sisters.

Unable to walk herself, her sisters supported her again when they were forced to walk into the water before they were killed on Bangka Island.

Flo was 38 when she was killed on Bangka Island.

#### **Matron Irene Drummond**

"Chin up girls. I'm proud of you all, and I love you all."

These are some of the last words from Matron Irene Drummond.

Matron Drummond was known as a celebrated nurse that could get a ward to operation under 48 hours in extreme conflict conditions. Her colleagues remembered her as a 'mother hen that would fuss over her chicks.'

She is also credited with sending civilian women and children who washed ashore to a neighbouring town, saving them from the massacre.

She was 36 when she was killed on Bangka Island.

#### **Sister Ellen 'Nell' Louisa Keats**

Known as 'Nell' by her friends and colleagues, Sister Ellen Keats was born, raised and worked as a nurse in South Australia before enlisting in the Australian Army Nursing Service.

She was a young but exceptional nurse known for being passionate about playing the pianoforte.

She was 26 when she was killed on Bangka Island.

#### **Lieutenant Mary Eleanor (Ellie) McGlade**

Few nurses took to caring from such a young age as Sister Mary 'Ellie' McGlade.

On her school records, teachers had noted that "no one has a chance to get seriously ill before she is reported and nursed back to normal by the indefatigable Ellie."

It is a passion she took to her career, becoming a nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney before enlisting in the Australian Army Nursing Service.

She was 39 when she died on Bangka Island.

#### **Sister Lorna' Florence' Fairweather**

Lieutenant Lorna Fairweather was a young but exceptional disability care nurse.

In her time with the Australian Army Nursing Service, she worked with the 2/10th Australian General Hospital and the 2/13th Australian General Hospital. She worked with many nurses who ended up with her on Bangka Island.

She was 29 when she died on Bangka Island.

#### **Western Australia**

##### **Sister Alma May Beard**

Sister Alma May Beard was a young WA rural nurse who loved travelling, having moved to Perth and then Sydney to work in larger hospitals.

She was well respected by her colleagues, including Lieutenant Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel. Lieutenant Colonel Bullwinkel wrote to Sister Beard's parents upon her return from war, stating that her brave conduct in the hour of crisis added lustre to the service.

She was 29 when she died on Bangka Island.

##### **Sister Minnie Hodgson**

Before her death, she was a well-respected nurse who supported Western Australia's remote communities and often travelled between her hometown of Leederville and Perth.

She was 33 when she died on Bangka Island.

##### **Sister Bessie Wilmott**

Sister Bessie Wilmott was born in Claremont, Western Australia, in 1913. She was known as a member of the Church of England, who was interested in theatre and was often seen with her stepmother and siblings.

She was trained as a nurse at Royal Perth Hospital and had periods of service at Perth Public Hospital and Metropolitan Infectious Diseases Hospital.

Sister Wilmott was known as a strong swimmer, having learned to swim as a child in Western Australia.

She was 28 when she died on Bangka Island

### **Sister Peggy Everett Farmaner**

Sister Peggy Farmaner was born in 1912 in Claremont, Western Australia and was part of a well-known settler family from the area.

She was known to have a garden under her name at her family estate that was tended to by family.

Her nursing career began at Perth Hospital, after which she moved to Sydney.

She was 28 when she died on Bangka Island

### **Notes to Editors:**

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is the national professional organisation for all nurses and its aim is to ensure that the Australian community receives quality nursing care now and in the future. ACN is a membership organisation with members in all states and territories, health care settings and nursing specialties. ACN is also the Australian member of the International Council of Nurses headquartered in Geneva. An organisation not afraid to challenge industry issues affecting the nursing profession or Australia's health care, ACN is a well-connected and educated national body that drives change with people of influence to enhance the delivery of health services to the Australian community. ACN's membership includes nurses in roles of influence, including senior nurses, organisational leaders, academics, and researchers.

### **Social media channels:**

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/acnursing>

Twitter: [https://twitter.com/acn\\_tweet](https://twitter.com/acn_tweet)

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/company/australian-college-of-nursing>

Instagram: [https://www.instagram.com/acn\\_nursing](https://www.instagram.com/acn_nursing)

### **CEO - Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward FACN - Bio**



**Kylie Ward. Policy Reformer. Nurse. For-Purpose Leader. Equality Warrior. Adjunct Professor. Transformation Specialist.**

Kylie is the CEO of Australian College of Nursing. She has led a program of transformation at ACN, which has now become Australia's beacon for Nurse Leadership.

She is a major policy influencer, advocate for women, children and equality.