

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian nurse to be carved into history **81st Anniversary of the sinking of the Vyner Brooke and Bangka Island Massacre**

To mark the 81st Anniversary of the sinking of the Vyner Brooke and the massacre of 21 nurses at Bangka Island, the Australian College of Nursing (ACN) has today unveiled the design of the statue of Lieutenant Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel AO, MBE, ARRC, ED, FNM, FRCNA that is set to be installed at the Australian War Memorial later this year.

The sculpture will be the first sculpture of an individual nurse or woman on the grounds of the Australian War Memorial.

ACN CEO Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward FACN paid respects to the nurses who lost their lives during the sinking of the SS Vyner Brooke on 14th February 1942 and the Bangka Island Massacre on 16th February 1942.

Eighty-one years ago, sixty-five Australian Army Nursing Service nurses were evacuated from Singapore on the SS Vyner Brooke due to the pending Japanese invasion. Twelve died at sea 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.

Adjunct Professor Ward reflected on the incredible courage the nurses displayed in the most horrific of situations and highlighted that their legacy still has a lasting impact on the nursing profession today.

“Eighty-one years ago, a group of Australian nurses paid the ultimate sacrifice for their dedication to serve their country and use their expertise to care for those who needed it most,” she said.

“They endured exceptionally trying conditions in the face of death. Even in their final moments, they stayed true in their commitment to care for others, with several supporting their injured nursing colleagues

as they walked into the water before their tragic deaths. For those nurses who spent the following years as Prisoners of War watching their colleagues suffer, starve, and sacrifice, with only a few returning home, I am committed to ensuring they are never forgotten.

“Erecting a sculpture of Bullwinkel at the Australian War Memorial will link the past, present and future for us to remember and be inspired by the sacrifice, service and leadership of Australian nurses.”

Brisbane-based artist Dr Charles Robb was appointed to create the sculpture following a limited invitation design competition in 2020.

“Whether on the Radji Beach or in her decades of service and advocacy to the nursing profession, Lieutenant Colonel Bullwinkel was dedicated to the act of caring for others,” Mr Robb said.

“I have aimed to reflect her incredible altruism in the design of my sculpture – Bullwinkel is placed to one side of her bronze pedestal, revealing a rippling surface in which twenty-one inlaid silver discs reflect the victims of the Bangka Island massacre and the main constellations of the night sky as it would have appeared on 16 February 1942.”

To ensure their legacy lives on, and in addition to leading the fundraising to erect a sculpture of Vivian Bullwinkel on the grounds of the Australian War Memorial, The Australian College of Nursing Foundation is establishing a scholarship in the name of each of the twenty-one nurses who died in the Bangka Island Massacre thanks to donors such as Aspen Medical.

Please donate to the Vivian Bullwinkel project to inspire generations, commemorate all nurses and midwives, and remind us of their selfless service to Australia, whether in war or peace.

[Donate by visiting the ACN Foundation website](#)

For more information:

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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.

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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.