


# A Brief History of the **Women's Memorial Playing Fields**



# About

## Helen Fischer:


- Member SI Torrens from 2012 to 2021
- On Region Committee as PR Representative for 2 terms of 2 years.
- Trust approached Allison Hobbs (then President SISA) to ask for representation of Soroptimist International on the Trust Committee.
- I volunteered because the history and the amazing women's stories it told interested me greatly. I have always been a strong advocate for women's role in history to have greater standing in society.
- I also had a daughter who was Army (first female the Army had trained as a marine engineer) and another who is a nurse  DSC\_0134 (2).JPG
- I joined the Trust in 2016 and in 2017 I was elected to the role of Vice President.
- Before the 2018 Bangka Day Memorial Service, I took on the role of Acting President and within 6 weeks was giving my first address to the Memorial Service as President.
- I have been the Trust President since, including throughout the redevelopment of the playing fields and memorial.
- I was able to win a \$500,000 grant from the Federal Government to pay for the memorial redevelopment. This gave the Trust a considerable amount of authority to ensure that the redevelopment was to a very high standard.



Bangka Day Memorial Service 2021




## Introduction to Women's Memorial Playing Fields

- The playing fields grew from a Farming allotment donated by May Mills, whose family-owned pastoral land extended from St Marys to what became Bellevue Heights and Flinders Medical Centre.
  - The old Pavilion, now demolished as part of the redevelopment, was named after this early pioneer who was instrumental in developing the women's playing fields.
  - The first formal meeting of the organisation was held in May 1953. It included female representatives from softball, athletics, hockey, cricket, basketball and swimming. It also included women representing other community interests affecting the welfare of women and girls.
  - It was apparent that there was a need and desire for a peak women's sporting body in SA as well as a need and desire for a dedicated women's sporting facility. Helen Black, in her role as Assistant Director of the National Fitness Council (SA), undertook the preliminary work.
  - May Mills became an important part of this as yet unnamed body and she and Helen Black undertook significant research before the first formal meeting, held later in 1953.
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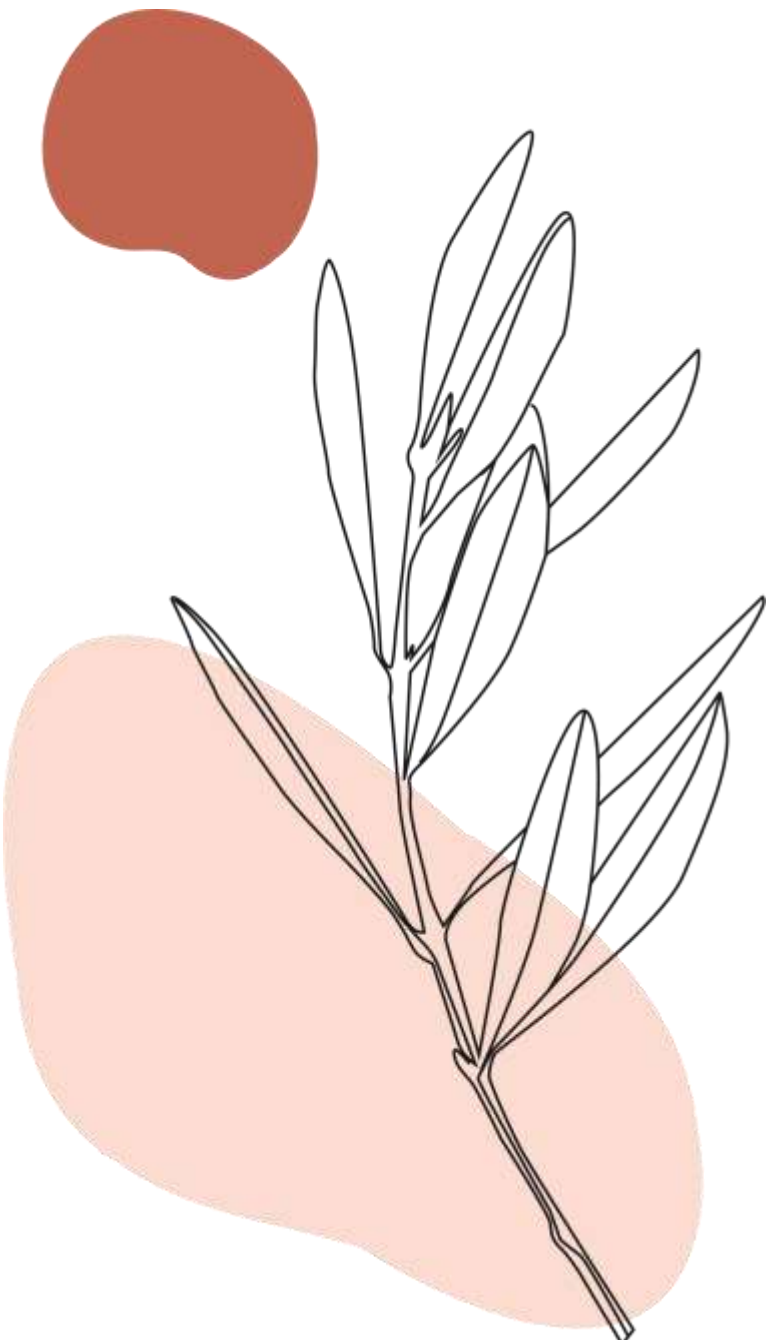


## Introduction to Women's Memorial Playing Fields

- The research was to prove valuable in presenting their case to the government. They discovered, for example, that some 35,000 women and girls, aged between 14 and 25 years, lived in Adelaide. At the time, available sports facilities could only cater for 5,000.
  - In other words, 80% of their target group were being ignored in terms of sports opportunities. On the strength of the information, they began to lobby then Premier, Thomas Playford, on the urgent need for women's sporting facilities in South Australia.
  - The SA Women's Sports Council was born and May Mills was elected as its first President and Helen Black was the first Council Secretary at the inaugural meeting in December 1953.
  - A few days later, the State Premier announced that the new Women's Sports Council had been granted a long-term lease for 18 acres of what was described as "the new Shepherd's Hill pleasure resort". The SA Women's Amateur Sports Council held the lease for 21 years at a peppercorn rent.
  - This potted history does not address the considerable amount of hard work and fundraising it took to develop the site into the one which existed *[except for some modifications added over time, as funds were available]* until 2020, when a major redevelopment was undertaken.
  - One of the major fundraisers was part-proceeds from the Miss Sportsgirl Quest.
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# May Mills OBE

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- Born in 1890, May Mills grew up in Nairne until secondary schooling sent her to board at Methodist Ladies College (now Annesley). She went on to study teaching in 1914.
  - Her appointment to Unley High School came in 1918. She remained there as a specialist geography teacher and also sports mistress, for *35* years.
  - At the time of her retirement from Unley High School she was a member of the Education Policy Board and University Geography Committee. She had been the first woman to present a paper to the Royal Geographical Society and to have a paper published in its journal.
  - May was also involved in the Youth Welfare Co-ordinating Committee and when this became the Council of Social Services, undertook the Vice-Presidency for some time.
  - In 1956 when illness depleted the teaching staff at Methodist Ladies College, where May had been a pupil herself over 50 years previously, she went back as a relieving teacher.



# May Mills OBE

- Another interest of May's was women's sport. She was a member of the S.A. Women's Amateur Sports Council, serving as President for seven years.
- She was also President of the Australian Women's Cricket Council and the S.A. Women's Cricket Association and became a life member of both.
- May Mills helped finance the Memorial Playing Fields on the corner of Ayliffes and Shepherds Hill Roads.
- For her services to education and for her work in establishing the Women's Memorial Playing Fields, May was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1960.
- From 1963, the administration of the Playing Fields was taken over by the SA Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust and May became President and a Life Member.
- The pavilion was named after her in 1967. May Mills died in 1984, at the age of 93.



# Helen Black

- In 1944, Helen Black joined the SA National Fitness Council as Assistant Organiser. She was well qualified for the role, having been involved in physical education for 2 decades.
- Helen Black was struck by the fact that women in SA would have to work hard for recognition of the fact they needed recreational facilities at least as much as men.
- Women in general, she is said to have noted, are apt to be entirely overlooked when recreational facilities were being developed.
- In addition to her work with the National Fitness Council, Helen Black took on the roles of providing advice, on recreational and physical training, to both the Women's Royal Australian Air Force and the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps.
- In post-war Adelaide, Helen Black also joined the League for Women Voters and became involved in the "School for Women MP's and their Electors".

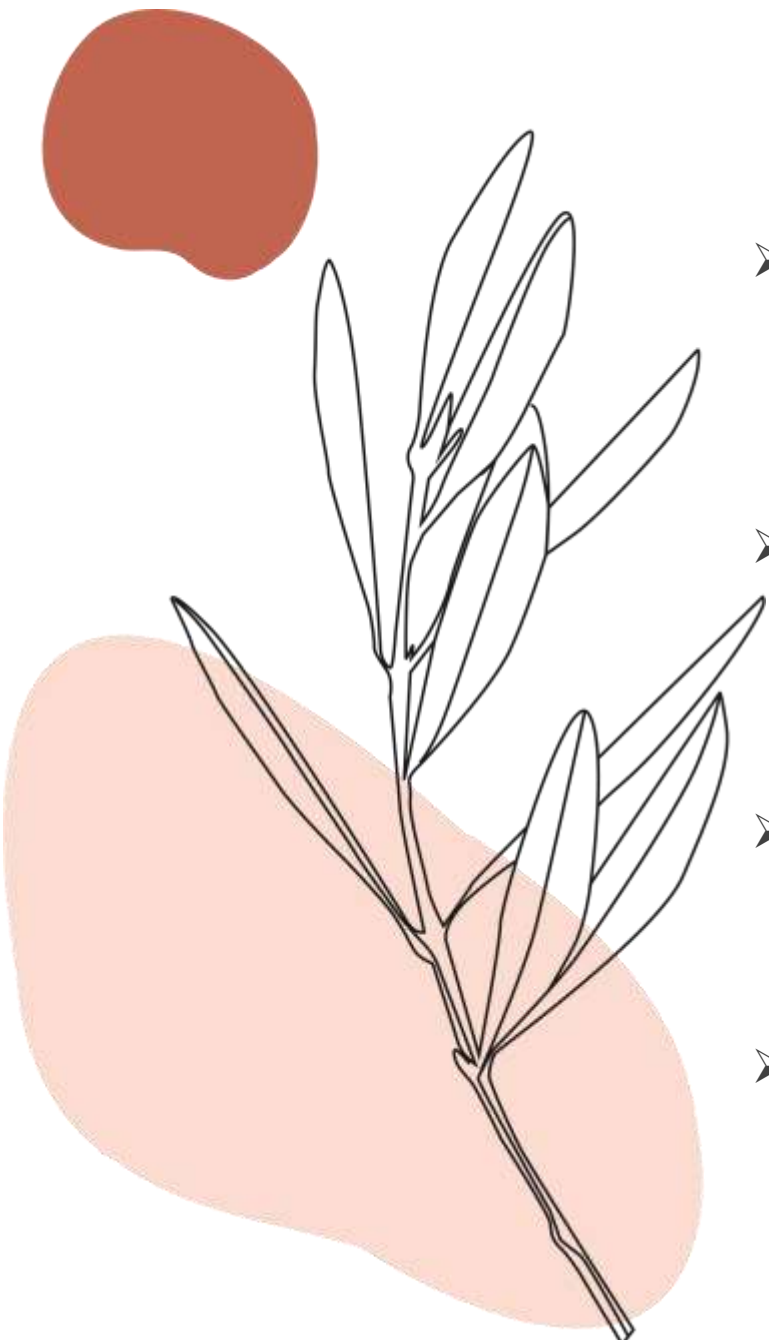


# Helen Black


- At the same time, Helen Black began formation of the Adelaide club of Soroptimist International. She held a number of executive roles once the club was constituted in 1949.
- If that wasn't enough, she also introduced softball to SA women's sport. Not only did this sport grow rapidly but Helen Black helped establish and run the Softball Association as well as coaching and umpiring games.
- Her memory is memorialised in the Helen Black Field at the Playing Fields, as a reminder of this remarkable sports enthusiast and administrator.



# Importance of the Site to Women

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- As mentioned, the site was developed as a sporting venue for women's sport, to give a much-needed home for many women's sports that previously lacked space and administrative capability. The role of the playing fields has continued today, especially with Flinders United Women's Soccer Club being one of the stakeholders.
  - A few years after the development of the playing fields, it became the site of a memorial to the nurses who were massacred on Radji Beach. In addition, the memorial commemorates all of the nurses, civilians and children who died after the sinking of the Vyner Brooke and those who did not survive in captivity on Bangka Island.
  - Some of the nurses who returned safely to Australia, including Vivian Bullwinkel, travelled the country to create living memorials to ensure that the story of the nurses' courage and resilience, as well as their sacrifice, was honoured and remembered for generations to come.
  - It is still an important facility, encouraging girls and women to reach their full potential and maintains a strong focus on women's wellbeing, health and social connection.

# Radji Beach

- The decision was made to evacuate all the women and children when it became clear Singapore would be invaded by the Japanese. Sixty-five Australian nurses, along with mainly mothers and small children, left Singapore onboard a small coastal steamer Vyner Brooke. It carried 180 passengers and 47 crew, instead of the 12 passengers it was meant to carry.
  - On 14 February 1942, Japanese aircraft bombed the overloaded vessel and it sank quickly. The nurses attended to the passengers, seeing that they got life jackets on and ushering them into lifeboats.
  - Twelve Australian nurses were killed in the attack. Of the remaining 53 nurses, 22 reached Radji Beach, whilst some made it to shore in other parts of Bangka Island and the remainder were lost at sea.
  - When the 90 survivors, including the 22 Australian nurses, landed in lifeboats on Radji Beach, they voted to surrender to the Japanese rather than slowly starve to death. The civilian women and children walked to Bangkok while the nurses stayed to tend to the wounded soldiers. However, when a Japanese patrol arrived at Radji Beach, they did not accept the surrender of either group.
  - After murdering the wounded soldiers, the Japanese ordered the nurses to form a line and walk into the sea. They did not panic or plead for mercy. They were then machine gunned down from behind.
  - Miraculously, there was one survivor, South Australian nurse Vivian Bullwinkel who, on discovering that she was only wounded, pretended to be dead. With incredible level-headedness and endurance, she evaded the Japanese. Ten days after the massacre, Vivian left her hiding place and walked to Muntok to surrender.
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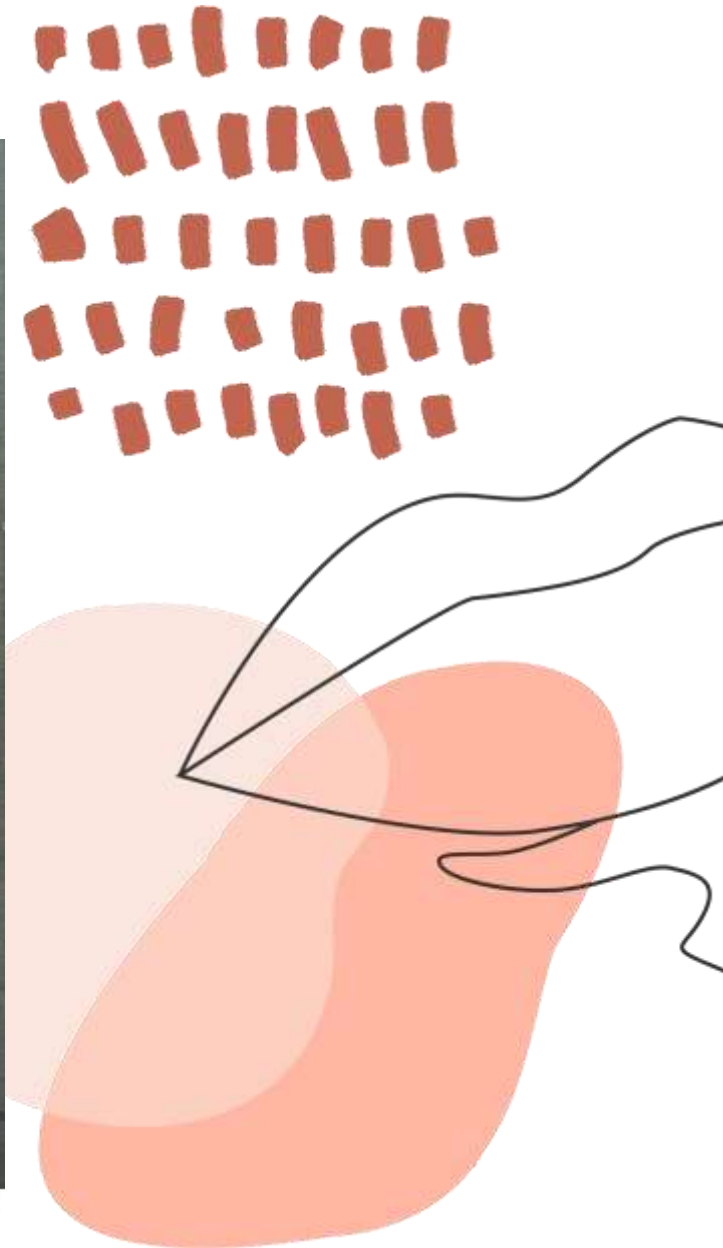
# LT COL Vivien Bullwinkel MBE AO

- Vivien Bullwinkel's name is synonymous with being the sole survivor of the 1942 Bangka Island massacre, despite being shot.
- She lived through three and a half years as a POW, with the prisoners maintaining secrecy from the Japanese of her status as a survivor of the massacre. She hid the bullet hole in her dress with a bag.
- Without her bravery and resilience the story would never have been known first-hand.
- Sr Bullwinkel also made a significant contribution to nursing when she resumed her career on returning to Australia.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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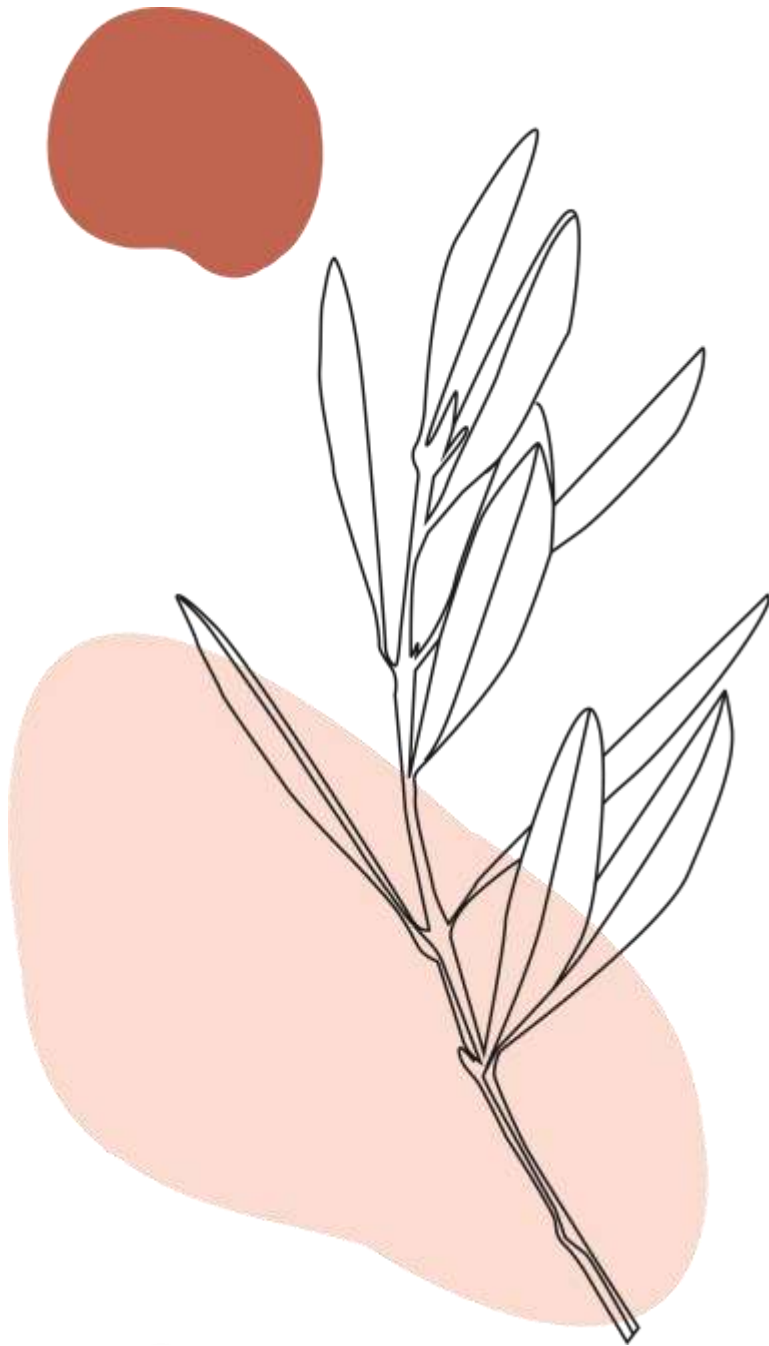


***“A great Australian, a great leader, a great woman and a proud nurse”.*** Adj Prof Kylie Ward, ACN Chief Executive



## Sr Vivien Bullwinkel

- Sister Vivian Bullwinkel was born on 18 December 1915 at Kapunda, South Australia and trained as a nurse at Broken Hill, New South Wales.
- When Sister Bullwinkel resumed her nursing career on returning to Australia in 1947, she resigned as Captain but re-joined the Citizen Military Forces in 1955 until 1970 when she retired as Lieutenant Colonel.
- She spent 16 years as Matron of Melbourne's Fairfield Hospital and continued there as Director of Nursing until 1977.
- She also joined a Soroptimist International club in Melbourne.
- Among her nursing accolades were the Florence Nightingale Medal and the Royal Red Cross Medal. She was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire in 1973 and to the Order of Australia in 1993.



## **Vivien Bullwinkel's contribution to the nursing profession includes:**

- Advocating for better education and conditions for nurses, something that is still relevant today.
- Establishing and raising funds for the Australian Nurses' Memorial.
- She held the role of President of the Royal College of Nursing for a number of years.
- She also became the first female member of the Council of the Australian War Memorial.
- And she served on various veteran and philanthropic committees to pay tribute to her fallen nursing colleagues.



# Bangka Day Memorial Services



- The Bangka Day Memorial Service is held on the nearest Sunday to 16th February each year.
- Some 300 to 350 people attend the Service each year. This includes senior military officers, descendants of the nurses, veterans service organisations, nursing associations, women's groups and sporting club members, as well as the general public.
- The Service is strongly supported by the 3rd Health Service Battalion, who provide resources and protocol advice.
- The catafalque party consists of currently serving nursing officers, a variation from the norm, where the catafalque party form an armed guard and act as sentries for the memorial or cenotaph.
- The Army Band has performed at every Bangka Day Memorial Service for nearly 25 years.
- The Repatriation Hospital Museum are strong supporters of the Bangka Day Service and have a display of artifacts each year.

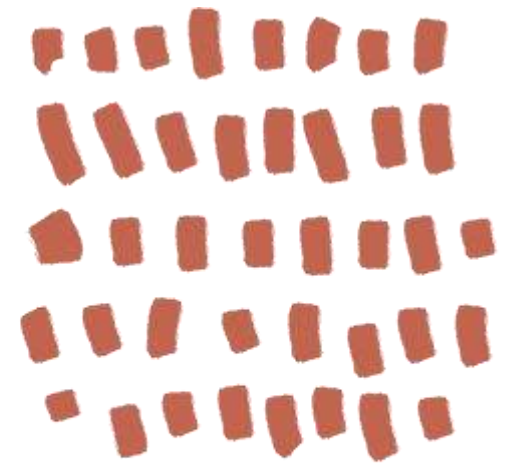
# Redevelopment of the Women's Memorial

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- The SA Women's Memorial Playing Fields Trust has worked for many years trying to attract funding to undertake much needed repairs to the pavilion.
  - In 2020 the Office for Recreation, Sport & Racing finalised plans to redevelop the entire site, including refurbishing the 3 ovals, adding new change rooms and clubrooms and a new memorial plaza in the physical and spiritual centre of the site.
  - Funding was provided by the State Government for the playing fields and facilities and by the Federal Government for the memorial to the nurses and to all women who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.
  - The site was closed in October 2020 and is now complete with the official handover taking place in May 2022 and the Opening by the Minister in October 2022.

# New Bangka Island Nurses' Memorial



- A low wall contains the inspiring words of Matron Drummond as the nurses were forced to walk into the sea and shot from behind.
- *“Chins up, Girls. I’m proud of you and I love you all.”*





# Features of Memorial

- Steel posts for each of the nurses who died, with the names, enlistment date and location and age on 16 February 1942.
- A large granite cenotaph with the Army, Navy and AirForce corps badges and the nursing corps badge, along with the original plaque attached to its polished front.
- A stylised version of the Vyner Brooke among rocks and plants to represent the islands off Indonesia.
- The nurses eternal flame, designed into the logo for the Trust.
- All wars and engagements in which women have served since the Boer War, etched into the plaza.
- The Memorial Plaza and steps up to the new clubrooms holds up to 500 guests.







**Design elements  
of the new  
memorial**



# Memorial Fountain

- A stone bench seat with a stone placed to support a plaque, was donated by Soroptimist International at some point in the 1970's to commemorate the strong links between the Trust and the Region.
- It reportedly held a drinking fountain and a plaque, both of which have been vandalised over time.
- Some old photographs and documents are held in the Trust's storage container on site and will be examined by myself and one of the Committee (who is also a member of the local Historical Society).
- SISA are considering having a plaque made to replace the one missing for decades.





# 100 Trees Project

- David Lawry has provided a report on the seedlings to date and suggested a plan with some funding from State Government or Council to achieve the aims of the 100 Trees Project.

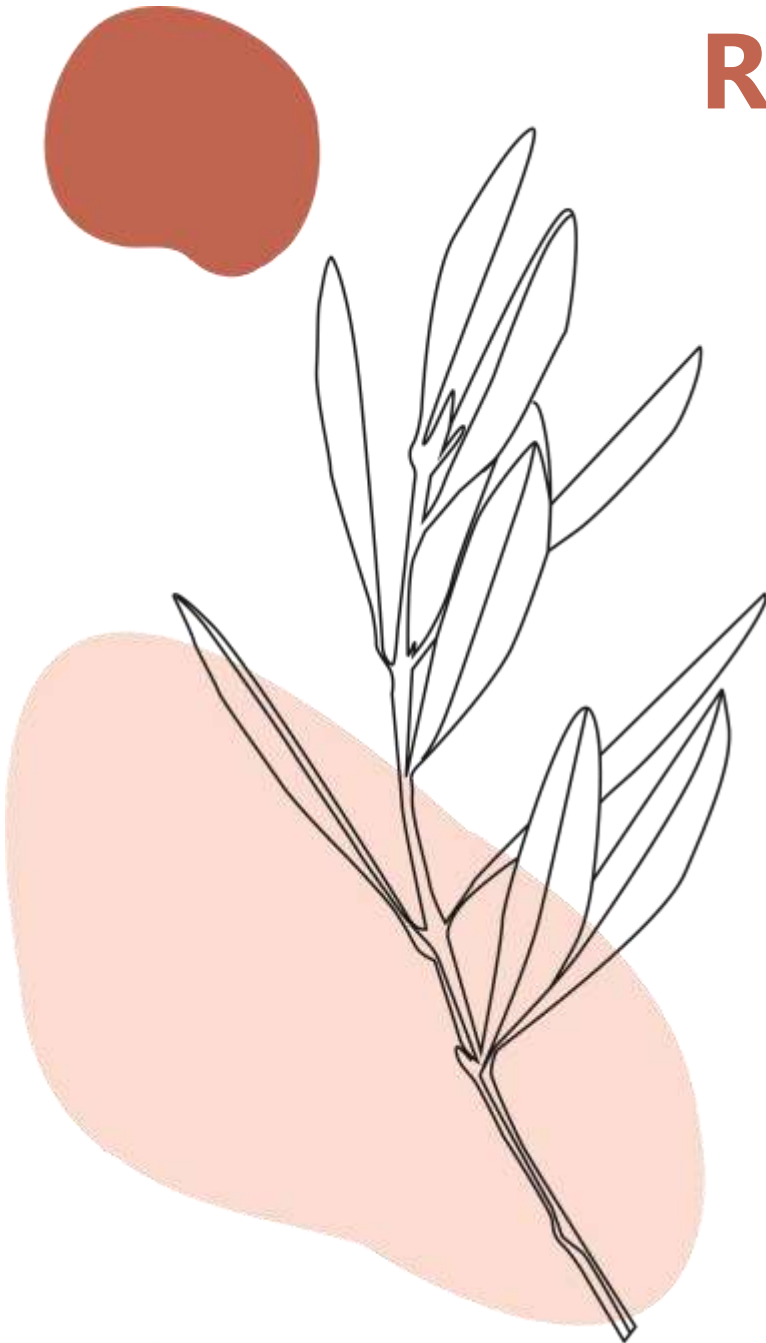


# Report on Seedlings

David's report included the following points:

- *The tubes were potted on immediately after picking up and this is how they look now.*
- *Most have survived but the quality is poor due to being held too long in small tubes.*
- *Long and lanky stems and very small root systems.*
- *Some formative pruning might help but I wouldn't recommend going to all the trouble in planting and following up maintenance for 3 years during establishment for the majority.*
- *The she oaks and golden wattles are ok but maybe only 5 blue gums.*
- *Far better to have a fresh start and plant perhaps 50 in 23 and grow another 50 for 24.*
- *I think a funding plan with council or state government should be prioritised.*

David reiterated that he is here to help and has asked for updates and conversation around any new plan.





# Future Directions



- The Trust is working towards making the Women's Memorial Playing Fields a site for women veterans to use as a meeting place and a therapeutic centre for women veterans' wellbeing.
- The aim is to make the space one which will be used to its fullest to encourage women who have served to keep fit, socially active and connected to other women veterans.






# Conclusion

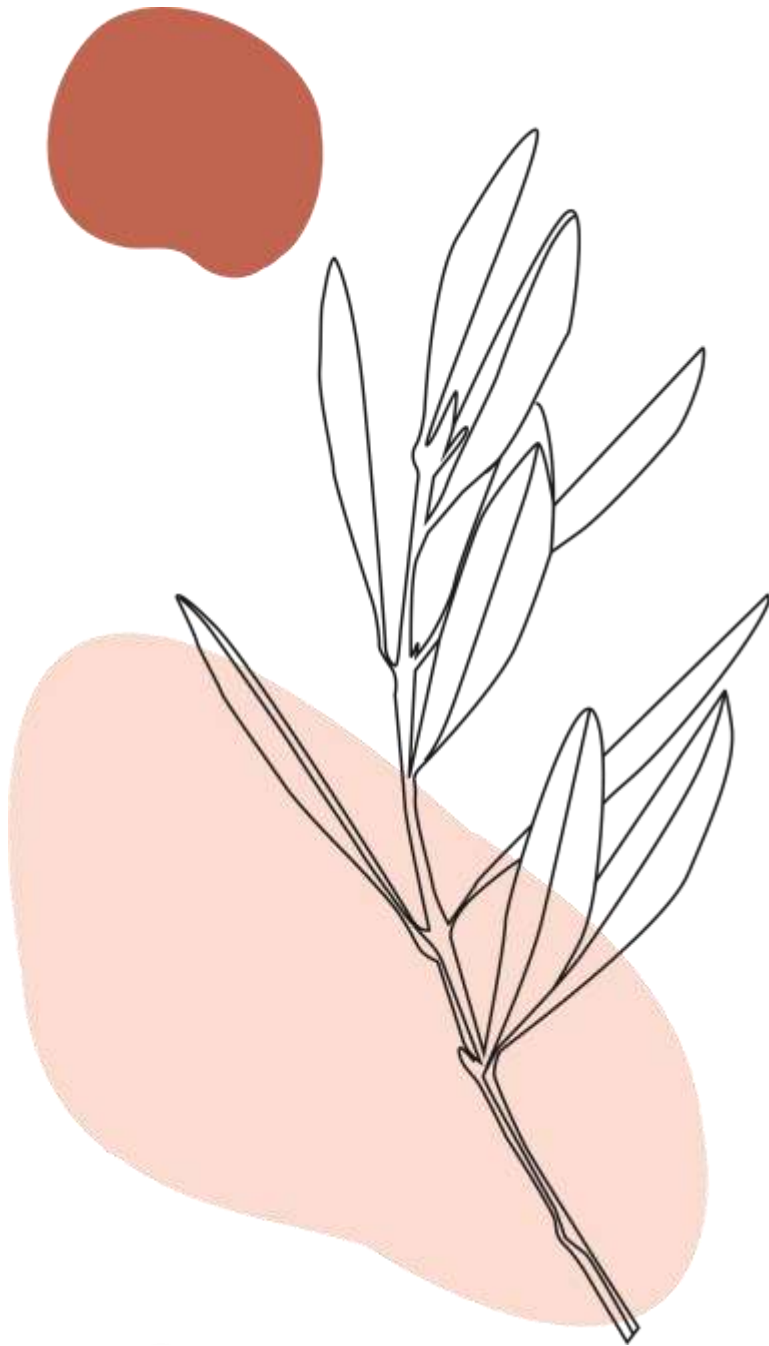
THE TRUST'S VISION IN THIS REDEVELOPMENT IS TO ENSURE THAT THE MEMORIAL NOT ONLY CONTINUES TO HONOUR AND COMMEMORATE THE NURSES WHO WERE MASSACRED ON RADJI BEACH, BUT ALSO ..... BECOMES AN ICONIC MEMORIAL TO ALL WOMEN WHO HAVE SERVED IN THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE.

***It is now the largest memorial in the Southern Hemisphere dedicated to women who have served.***

For the Sporting Clubs, the site holds a special place in encouraging young women and girls to play sports, participate in team activities and care for a history rich with strong women who came before them.







## Resources

- Shaw, I., 2017, *Field of Dreams*, self-published
- [Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](http://awm.gov.au)
- Mills Family History, [www.millsfamily.com.au](http://www.millsfamily.com.au)
- Shaw, I., 2010, *On Radji Beach*, Pan McMillan Australia

# Thank you