

The Australia College of Nursing Mid-Career Nurse Leadership Program

Sister Nancy Harris

The Nancy Harris Scholarship for Rural Nurse Leadership

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is the national leader of the nursing profession. ACN's Mid-Career Nurse Leadership Program aims to enhance nursing leadership to improve health care for all Australians. A mid-career nursing leadership program enhances the capacity and capability of registered nurses who generally have more than 6 years of professional experience and have the capacity to strongly influence organisations, team cultures and practices.

Nursing leadership is required at all levels to meet the future challenges of the health and aged care systems. ACN defines leadership as being about influencing others to accomplish common goals. It is a complex and multifaceted process, which involves providing support, motivation, coordination and resources to enable individuals and teams to achieve collective objectives. ACN's approach to leadership is inclusive and patient / consumer focused, meaning that the promotion of nurse leadership is not at the exclusion of others, and at all times aims to improve health and healthcare for patients / consumers and the community more broadly.

Nurses have a central role to play in navigating the future challenges of the health and aged care systems and ensuring the provision of quality, innovative and cost-effective care. Within nursing there are projections of a workforce shortage over the next ten years, not only in Australia but across health systems worldwide. Retention of nurses who have experience and have the capacity to influence organisations, team cultures and practices should be a key strategy of policy holders in meeting the future challenges of the health care system.

The Mid-Career Nurse Leadership Program is a career consolidator, a dynamic course which empowers nurses to lead change in a rapidly changing environment. Throughout the six-month program participants are empowered to discover their inner leadership capacity and learn to lead change in a rapidly reforming environment.

By taking part in this innovative course, registered nurses will be empowered and inspired through personal development, career coaching and learning sets. Mid-Career Nurse Leaders will be equipped with the skills to lead health workplace cultures through innovation, redesign, and change. Participants will have honed the ability to develop high-performing teams that facilitate a culture of success and achievement.

Sister Nancy Harris



Sister Nancy Harris NX 76285, was a member of the 2/13th Australian General Hospital. Described variously as aged 29 years at the time of the sinking of the SS Vyner Brooke Nancy was presumably born around 1912/13. Research has failed to find out much about her family and early life; although the book 'On Radji Beach' says she was from a medical family.

The Australian War Memorial website states that Sister Harris was the daughter of Dr John Solomon Harris of North Sydney NSW, although this may be in conflict with a newspaper in 1937 – see below?). In the book 'Sister Kenny: The Women Who Challenged the Doctors', a Doctor John Solomon Harris is described (in about 1911) as 'short, Jewish, rather stiff but always willing to do a kindness or a favour'. So, Nancy may well have been Jewish.

Nancy first appears in regional newspapers attending balls as a teenager in the Byron Bay area of NSW. In 1934 when she would have been around 21 years of age it was reported in the 'Northern Star' newspaper at Lismore in country NSW (21.12.34) that "... Miss Nancy Harris of Byron Bay has left to join the nursing staff of Prince Henry Hospital of Wales.

Before leaving she was presented with a fountain pen by the staff of the Byron Bay Post Office..." suggesting that Nancy may have been employed in the Post Office between her schooling and nursing career. The Prince Henry Hospital of Wales was a hospital also known as Coast Hospital and was merged some 40 years later with two other hospitals to form the current Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney.

In 1936 there is another report in the same newspaper that "... Nancy Harris has spent three weeks holiday with her parents at Byron Bay before returning to Sydney to resume duties at the Coast Hospital...". Again in 1937 another paper ("Tweed Daily" Murwillumbah, 13.1.37) reported that "... Miss Nancy Harris after spending the holiday with her parents Mr. & Mrs. G. Harris at Byron Bay has returned to Prince Henry Hospital to continue training ...". It is assumed that in 1938 she would have passed her Nurses exam in NSW. One record states of her life around this time that she "... trained at Royal North Shore Hospital and joined the staff of the dental hospital on completing her training. Just before the war she travelled in Fiji, China and Japan ...".

Nancy enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service on 21 August 1941. From her paybook photo taken on enlistment she is shown as a slim young woman with wavy brown hair, hazel eyes and with a confident direct look at the camera.

Nancy left South Australia in August 1941 and sailed for Malaya on the Hospital Ship Wanganella, arriving on 15 September 1941. She was posted to the 2/13th Australian General Hospital that was initially located at St Patrick's School on Singapore Island. Between 21-23 November 1941 the entire hospital was moved across the Strait to Tampoi Hill on the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Due however, to the swift progress of the Japanese invasion force, most of the hospital staff was evacuated back to Singapore in late January 1942.

In an ironic twist of history and several months prior to the wartime boarding of the SS Vyner Brooke in February 1942, Nancy and Vivian Bullwinkel, had already experienced the layout of the ship. In September 1941 they had attended a dinner party hosted by Reserve Officers of the Royal Navy on the SS Vyner Brooke. (On Radji Beach p.117). A number of these Officers were later also killed at Radji Beach.

After the ship left Singapore on its last voyage and whilst under attack, Nancy apparently shared a 'battle station' with Vivian Bullwinkel (On Radji Beach p. 141). Nancy presumably was either in the first lifeboat to reach Radji Beach (although this would only have been if she was ordered on board that boat to care for the wounded) or more likely, was one of the large group of nurses holding onto the upturned submerged second lifeboat and accompanying life rafts which landed further along the coast with several badly wounded nurses. Nancy would have then walked with the wounded along the coast to the beacon bonfire lit by the first lifeboat survivors.

On the day of the mass murder of the sailors, soldiers, civilians and nurses on Radji Beach and as the nurses watched the Japanese return from murdering the second group of men along the Beach, Nancy is reported (obviously via Vivian Bullwinkel's memory) to have observed to no one in particular "... It's true then, they don't take prisoners ..." (On Radji Beach, p.214).

So, Nancy Harris a dedicated young woman in her late twenties, who had grown up in the peaceful and serene environment of Byron Bay, was killed for no sane reason with her close colleagues and friends on Radji Beach.

Principal Sources:

Australian Nurses Memorial Centre

<https://australiannursesmemorialcentre.org.au/index.php/stories/>

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(1) On Radji Beach page 214

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