

Sexual Assault Silences in War Memorialisation: The Lesson of Vivian Bullwinkel

Written by Amy Capuano

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AMY CAPUANO, NOV 27 2024

The best clothing performs an aesthetic sleight of hand. An artful sartorial deception simultaneously highlights and hides parts of the wearer's body, accentuating some features while obscuring others. Similarly, Vivian Bullwinkel's dress at the Australian War Memorial (AWM) appears to reveal and shroud truths. Bullwinkel, an Australian Army nurse, wore the dress during the Banka Island massacre of February 1942, in which Japanese soldiers ordered 22 captured nurses to wade into the water, and then machine-gunned them (Australian War Memorial). The sole survivor, Bullwinkel eventually made it back to Australia with the dress largely intact except for two bullet holes and some missing buttons. Today, the dress is part of the AWM's exhibition of World War Two artefacts, accompanied by an information panel about the attack. But the display omits some key details.

This essay argues that the display of Bullwinkel's dress offers, through the contrast of what it reveals versus what it reportedly conceals, a unique insight into silences about sexual assaults in war memorialisation. This essay proceeds in two sections. Section 1 presents a close-up look at the Bullwinkel artefact and contrasts the meanings conveyed by the display with the omissions uncovered by historians. Section 2 uses this contrast as a catalyst to zoom out from the dress and present some of the forces operating behind silences on sexual assault in war memorialisation. The essay concludes by arguing that the AWM's display of Bullwinkel's dress – which both speaks to, and apparently remains silent on, elements of the Banka Island attack – is a symbol of the gap between wartime experiences and their commemorative representations, and is therefore an artefact that offers a unique insight into war and its memorialisation.

What does the display reveal and conceal?

The dress itself is neat and orderly, with a design that invokes a sturdy femininity. It is an outfit suitable for serious work – practical pockets, durable fabric – but with elegant draping, decorative pleats down the bodice, and a shaping belt at the waist. The length, falling well below the knee, suggests modesty. There are medals displayed beside the dress, but the garment itself is unadorned except for a Red Cross emblem stitched on a sleeve cuff. It is composed, unassuming, unruffled. There are no bloodstains. No rips or frays. No jagged edges or mud splatters. You have to look carefully to see the small hole above the midline, and the two missing buttons near the bottom hem. It is an artefact that presents as largely unruptured by violence. The effect is one of quiet, dignified strength, infused with a noble purpose of healing. It is a representation that feels familiar because it aligns with other common images of women in war: women demonstrating “initiative to help others” (Féron 2023, 53), symbolising “traditional maternal values of family and domesticity” (Jacobs 2017, 432), and “offering succour and compassion” (Elshtain 1987, 4). This is particularly true of the representation of nurses in war, who, as Elshtain argues:

“... soothe, heal, tend, offer solace. They promise a ‘woman’s touch’ ... a dream of surcease and comfort. War nurses were ‘angels of mercy’.” (1987, 183)

The display invokes Elshtain's Hegelian notion of “Beautiful Souls” – women who embody “values and virtues at odds with war's destructiveness, representing home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life” (1987, xiii).

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The emotive power of the display comes from the contrast of this representation juxtaposed with the violence of the massacre conveyed by the accompanying information panel. The brief text features Bullwinkel's story of surviving the machine gun attack and her ensuing ordeal in a nearby jungle and prison camp and informs the viewer that the small hole in the front of the dress was made by a bullet. There are also implied meanings in the text. It gestures to Bullwinkel's essential goodness and almost pious quality, using words such as "devoted" and "endured". The dress and information panel prime the observer to feel appalled at the subjection of dignified purity – personified by Bullwinkel and her fellow nurses – to violence. One meaning conveyed by the display is that "Beautiful Souls" like Bullwinkel were caught in war's maw, thus quantifying one of the costs exacted by conflict. It also implicitly invites us, as AWM Director Matt Anderson said, to feel "inspired" by this story of courage and forbearance, and perhaps uplifted that grace and decency can yet be present amongst war's darkest horrors.

But some insist this is not the full story. Academics (Tanaka 1996, 88-89), historians (Silver 2019), writers (Banks 2023), and journalists (Fanning 2023; Barlass 2019; Lawrence 2017) say Bullwinkel and her fellow nurses were likely raped by the Japanese soldiers before being forced into the sea and shot. The claims are not new, having appeared in public discourse for several decades (e.g., Abjorensen 1993) and referenced in more recent years by high-profile figures including a current Australian Prime Minister (Albanese 2022). Silver has arguably led the most detailed contemporary work in this area.[1] In *Angels of Mercy*, she claims an examination of Bullwinkel's uniform reveals that the bullet's entry and exit points, evidenced by the holes on the front and back of the dress, do not align with one another when the dress hangs straight. They only align when the dress is undone and open to the waist, suggesting a state of dishevelment when Bullwinkel was forced into the water and shot (2019, 361). Further, Silver notes that the top two buttons are sewn on with different coloured thread than the rest, and were likely taken from the bottom of the dress and moved to the top. This, Silver claims, indicates that Bullwinkel's uniform bodice "was ripped open so forcefully that the buttons were torn off and lost, making it necessary to replace them with buttons 6 and 7 on the skirt" (2019, 362). If true, the story of the dress changes. Far from the poised representation in the AWM exhibition, the dress was perhaps sullied and disfigured, torn open and apart, leaving its owner – a "Beautiful Soul" – exposed and violated.

This leads to the question of why there is a gap between these supposed events and their representation. Silver, Lawrence and Fanning all claim that Bullwinkel was instructed by "the Australian Government" not to mention the sexual assault at the subsequent war crimes trials in Tokyo in 1946, and that, decades later, Bullwinkel's biographer also discouraged her from telling this story on the grounds that it would upset the relatives of the murdered nurses (Silver 2019, 363; Lawrence 2017; Fanning 2023). The following section pulls this thread further, using the Bullwinkel artefact (and its apparent omissions) as a springboard to discuss silences about sexual assault in war memorialisation more broadly.

Sexual assault silences in war memorialisation

It is not common for war memorials to explicitly represent sexual and gender-based violence (Féron 2023, 47, 49). For example, women violated by law enforcement and paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland are "almost completely ignored in official commemorations (and) community memorials" (Féron 2023, 54). In Bosnia-Herzegovina there is an "absence of the memorialisation of the approximately 50,000 (mostly Muslim) victims of mass rape" (Jacobs 2017, 432). Although a monument outside Rwanda's parliament obliquely signals sexual violence through the portrayal of a dishevelled woman in a passive position on the ground (Mannergren Selimovic 2023, 38), commemoration and memorialisation of the mass sexual assaults that took place in Rwanda's civil war and genocide are rare (Burnet 2012, 102). There are many reasons for these absences, and this essay makes two distinctions about them: the victims are *silent* and/or *silenced*, with the exercise of agency by the victim in the matter of silence as the determining factor for each category. This categorisation is not a neat one. Some victims who "choose" to remain silent may be constrained in their choice by adherence to societal attitudes that attach shame to rape victims. Further, some victims may belong to both categories, with multi-layered forces at play in an outcome of silence. However, the silent/silenced binary is nevertheless a useful tool to begin to uncover why war memorialisation often does not include sexual and gender-based violence.

Decisions over whether a victim is silent/silenced are powered by an understanding of what is deemed to be a public

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or private activity – a dichotomy which Enloe describes as “one of the most potent mechanisms for political silencing” (2004, 73). Rape has been seen to reduce women’s “respectability” (Enloe 2004, 74-75; Abiral 2016, 102-103) and therefore traditionally been kept out of the public arena (Guillaume and Schweiger 2018, 98; Stefatos 2016, 83). This is borne out in testimonies including that of a doctor treating Chinese victims of rape by the Japanese in Hong Kong, who reported that the victims “felt so ashamed and disgraced that most of them would rather have died than to have had it known” (Yap 2016, 63). Coding rape as a private activity has a direct impact on war memorialisation, which is necessarily public:

“for many survivors of such violence it is impossible, or at the very least extremely difficult, to talk about what happened, especially when the violence they experienced targeted the core of their gender identity, such as in the case of sexual violence. Since memorialisation work entails a certain level of publicity, it is not necessarily welcomed by survivors. For them, the risk of stigmatization, both socially and by their relatives, the weight of trauma [...] are daunting” (Féron 2023, 49)

In Rwanda, for example, many female victims of wartime rape opted not to participate in commemorative ceremonies organised by survivor groups as they felt their experiences were too deeply personal to share “with strangers” (Burnet 2012, 102). Whether victims’ feelings that their wartime rape experiences are a private (not public) violation are intrinsically or extrinsically constructed (i.e. whether the victims are being *silent* according to their own preferences or *silenced* because of social conditioning) is debatable and complex to unpack. No matter the provenance of these preferences, the question is how to appropriately deal with survivors’ wishes while also acknowledging the events of war. Jacobs refers to this as the dilemma of memorialisation – the problem of “how to break the silence surrounding rape memory while still protecting and respecting the lives of those for whom these acts of memorialisation are intended to honour” (Jacobs 2017, 435).

Beyond the public/private dichotomy, there are other reasons a victim may be silent/silenced about rape in war. One is the desire not to distress family members of other victims – an issue that has been raised in connection with the Bullwinkel case, as mentioned in Section 1. Banks expressed a similar concern in her recent book about the Banka massacre, asking “Am I just stirring up agony for the surviving relatives?” (2023, 141-142). In other instances, rape victims remained silent about their assaults because they considered their harms to be marginal compared with the scale of other wartime atrocities, such as mass exterminations in the holocaust (Mühlhäuser 2016, 36).

The state may also have an interest in silencing wartime rape. Stories of mass sexual assault may be incompatible with a post-conflict image of a strong, rebuilding nation whose men were unable to protect their families (Féron 2023, 54). States’ concerns may also have racialised undercurrents, such as the case of European women raped by Japanese soldiers, in which “infringement of white female honour came to be seen as an assault on white supremacy and European rule” (Stoler cited in Yap 2016, 59). And rape may be a phenomenon so distressing that it may disturb the public appetite for war altogether, disrupting the favourable public opinion that Clausewitz maintained was crucial for the conduct of war (Elshtain 1987, 77). State-funded memorials such as the AWM also play a silencing role. Although the AWM’s stated objective is to cultivate an understanding of war experiences (Australian War Memorial 2023b, 5), there are implied limits to that understanding. A warts-and-all presentation depicting mutilated bodies, scenes of sexual assaults other horrors would likely be too graphic for visitors, particularly those with personal connections to veterans, or for the delicate eyes of visiting school children. In seeking to be places of healing as well as remembrance, memorials like the AWM attempt, as Winter describes, to find a balance between “the profane and the sacred” (Winter 2014, 86) and are an edited version of the actual events of the war (Féron 2023, 57).

Together, these various and overlapping factors have led to the absence of sexual assault in war memorialisation, and there are consequences for these absences. As Mannergren Selimovic argues, “Commemoration is always political as stories are told that legitimate and de-legitimate certain actions and make some experiences more important than others” (2023, 36). Silences “rob the public of ideas” (Enloe 2004, 70) and “trivialise gendered war atrocities” (Jacobs 2017, 435). But at the same time, silence cannot be taken as coercion. Refusing to talk about sexual assault may be its own form of agency (Petó 2016, 26). It depends on what is in the mind of the victim, what social forces have conditioned those views, and what authorities have deemed acceptable in public discourse.

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Conclusion

In her memoir, Gwen Dew pays tribute to the courage of a nurse in Hong Kong who, despite great emotional difficulty, tells Dew of her experience of being raped by Japanese soldiers in WWII. Dew reflects:

“No woman on earth is going to tell of being gang-raped by enemy soldiers unless it is imperative, and only the bravest would be willing to tell her story to the world” (1943, 136).

The threads of the story are similar to what purportedly happened to Bullwinkel. Captured nurses. A gang rape by Japanese soldiers. Same war. But a different silencing outcome. Does this mean that Bullwinkel was not, to use Dew’s terminology, brave? Perhaps, if she was the sole survivor of a traumatic massacre, Bullwinkel felt a responsibility to the families of the other victims, whose loss might have been magnified by this knowledge. Or perhaps, as a former army nurse, she was sensitive to directives from authorities and was following orders not to speak. Or perhaps she was keeping silent on her own terms, as a way of controlling her own story and reclaiming her own dignity. Perhaps the neat presentation of the dress metaphorically stitches Bullwinkel whole again – a garment she tenderly adjusted to become a symbol of strength and endurance rather than shame. Or perhaps the dress demonstrates a willingness to sanitise and repackage trauma for the palatability of tourists and visitors and is symbolic of a lingering failure of a society to grapple with war’s full atrocities and the most appropriate way to honour these in memorialisation practices. Or perhaps Bullwinkel had internalised the signals she received that her experience was simply not one that people wanted to hear. As Abiral writes, “Each woman narrates what she considers worth sharing. The presence of an audience curious about otherwise silenced experiences may change the content of the narration” (2016, 102).

We may never know. Bullwinkel died of a heart attack in 2000, and we are left to weave together her story out of scraps of reported conversations and an almost pristine garment encased in glass. But this uncertainty bequeaths its own legacy. In contrast to what it reveals and conceals, the dress becomes a symbol of the gap between wartime experiences and their commemorative representations and is therefore an artefact that offers a unique insight into war and its memorialisation.

Notes

[1] It is beyond the scope of this essay to test Silver’s claims, but the AWM’s Head of Military History Section, Dr Karl James, said in emails the author on 31/8/23 and 4/9/23: “Silver is a well-known historian who is heavily invested in this topic and the Australian prisoners of war of the Japanese. As she writes for a popular readership though, not all of her assertions or statements are referenced so at times it is very difficult to follow her research and test her assertions... Overall though, in the war crimes trials and the press coverage, there were concerns about publicly airing all the details of violence, brutality and torture that Australians POWs suffered – physical, sexual and mental – or for what Australian forces did to the enemy. See (McKernan 2001).”

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