

54098 Becoming Australia

Assessment 3

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It was 10:27 in the morning and the asphalt was already hot enough to sting my bare feet as I stood in the middle of the road in my pyjamas. My neighbours all poured out onto the street in a similar state of shock and confusion, as we tried to figure out what the hell just happened. My first thought was that the steelworks must have exploded. After all, BHP had laid so many people off over the last few years, something was bound to go wrong. Mrs C from next door thought one of the mines had collapsed. Tom across the street said he'd heard on the radio a bomb had gone off in town. I don't think anyone's first thought was an earthquake. I mean, yes, San Francisco was still fresh in our minds, but this was Newcastle. We don't get earthquakes here, right?

As I listened to the speculation, I realised that whatever had happened, I needed to get to work as soon as possible. I ducked back into the house, grabbed my bag, threw my uniform on over my pyjamas and ran back out onto the street.

"Hey Tom, any chance you could gimme a lift to the hospital? Technically it's my day off but they probably need all hands on deck and I can't get into town with the bus strike."

He nodded, "Yeah 'course love, I'll just grab my keys."

The journey which would usually take 10 minutes took half an hour. There were police roadblocks, abandoned cars, and destruction everywhere. The footpaths were littered with broken glass from shop windows, piles of bricks and fallen awnings. People were just wandering in the streets, unsure of where to go or what to do. The electricity was out and the phone lines were down, so people crowded around car radios eagerly awaiting updates. I stared in shock as we drove passed Wickham Public School. Part of the roof had collapsed, littering the schoolyard with bricks and debris. Thank God it was school holidays.

Reports started coming in over the radio of the extensive damage to homes and businesses all over the city. There was a fire at the steelworks, and another at Tighes Hill Tech College. Hamilton was one of the worst hit suburbs, with reports of people trapped beneath the rubble as awnings fell and the old buildings crumbled in Beaumont Street. As the horrific details kept coming, I tried my best to brace myself for what might await me at the hospital. I didn't know then that I'd never make it to the hospital that day.

As we turned onto King Street there was a huge roadblock and we couldn't go any further in the car.

"Cheers Tom, I'll just walk down to the hospital from here. You get home safe!"

"You too, love!"

I'd gotten all of 500 metres when I saw the Workers Club. Or rather, what was left of the Workers Club.

It was a scene of utter devastation. The support beams had failed and the roof had collapsed inward, creating a domino effect as it smashed down through the second, first, ground floor, and down into the basement car park. What was left was a cavernous space, filled with a mess of steel bars, concrete, bricks, glass, fallen pokie machines and cars. Plumes of concrete dust rose from the rubble as employees of the club, themselves wounded, helped people out of the wreckage and onto the grass median strip in the road. I could only see a single ambulance on the scene, a handful of police and a man in a hard hat who seemed to be coordinating the beginnings of a rescue effort. I approached him, identified myself as a nurse and asked if I could help. I didn't even catch his name, but he asked me to stay until the other ambos and fireies and the SES could get there. We didn't yet know at this stage just how thinly stretched the emergency services were, and with the ambulance station at Hamilton out of commission, we were actually waiting on ambulances to come from Sydney and the Central Coast. We also had no clue how many people were still inside, a fact we were sharply reminded of when a cry for help echoed from inside the rubble.

With one other paramedic and a policeman in tow, I headed into the building. From where we were standing on the footpath, there was a huge concrete slab angled down into the basement on a steep slope. We slowly edged our way down it, before climbing up the pile of rubble on the other side to reach a small area which was still level, tucked away at the back of the building. It was a corner full of pokies that would have been part of the first floor. Walking up onto the landing, I held my breath with every step I took, with no idea how stable the floor beneath my feet or the ceiling above my head was.

As I rounded the row of machines that were still standing, I saw an elderly woman lying on the floor. She was conscious but her leg was pinned underneath a pokie, which was knocked down and covered by a huge piece of concrete. We had no hope of moving her to assess the damage, at least not until proper rescuers arrived. All we could do was give her IV fluids and meds for the pain. I tried to keep her calm as she sobbed uncontrollably. She told me her name was Margaret Wells and she, like many of the people we would pull from the rubble that day, had come to the club for her weekly game of hoy. She had been playing the pokies for a few minutes before the game was due to start at 10:30 when everything came crashing down. As I went to cannulate her, I saw that she was still clutching her five cent pieces.

The next few hours are a bit of a blur, a montage of memories set against a symphony of sirens. The rescue crew quickly grew to a cast of more than a hundred fireies, paramedics, doctors, police, SES workers, and civilians. I was the only woman though. At one point I had to lay on my stomach and crawl through a tiny gap that we had made to access a group of three people stuck in a pocket under a mountain of unstable debris. We'd heard muffled cries that we were choking them with the concrete dust being churned up as we excavated. I remember the gritty taste of the dust in my mouth as I strained to see in the tight, dark space. The only way to get back out was to have two men grab me by the legs and pull. This was the 80s so nurses still wore dresses, and I remember being thankful that I still had my pyjama shorts on underneath. Not that I really cared

about dignity or decency at this point: the numbness and shock of the warzone we were operating in had well and truly sunk in.

I remember running out to get more supplies from the ambulance and seeing the scene on the street. The median strip on the road in front of the building had become a makeshift hospital with doctors and nurses improvising first aid. There were patients laying on stretchers on the grass with their IV fluid drips hanging from trees. Further down, they'd erected a tarpaulin tent to provide some shelter from the sweltering 30-degree heat as they treated people in the direst conditions. I watched one man, whom we'd managed to pull from the rubble alive only a few minutes earlier, go into cardiac arrest and die right there on the grass. And I couldn't stop to feel anything. I knew I had to get back in there and try and save the next one.

Seven hours passed. They felt like seven minutes. Eventually I had to tap out and hand the work on to the next shift. With no way of knowing how many victims were left inside and what condition they were in, the rescue effort went on for days. Even with the stories of hope inspired by the San Francisco quake a few months earlier, eventually people gave up hope of finding anyone else alive.

I walked home in the warm evening air. Every inch of me was scratched and scraped and covered in dust and sweat and tears. My fingernails were ripped and bloody from shovelling bricks and concrete. I had been screamed at and sworn at. I was there as we saved lives and as we lost some. And yet, my name would be lost to the histories.

In the wake of any disaster, a community creates legends and tells stories. As Australia mourned with us for one of the worst natural disasters we'd ever known, and the city of Newcastle came to terms with the devastating loss of life and heritage, the stories of the Newcastle Workers Club rescue party would be those of the brave and chivalrous men who put their own lives at risk, working for hours inside a building so unstable it could come tumbling down at any moment. Everyone who was in Newcastle on Thursday 28th December 1989 has their own earthquake story, which live on even if only as anecdotes they tell their friends and family. And this is mine.

My name is Lesley Elvin. I was the first nurse on the scene at the Newcastle Workers Club. I helped pull thirteen people from the wreckage and for five hours I was the only woman treating the injured inside the rubble. This is my story.

Exegesis

This piece of creative writing is part speculative biography, part historical fiction. It is fictitious, but it is based on an oral history of Lesley Salem, the first nurse on the scene at the Newcastle Workers Club during the 1989 Newcastle Earthquake. While this work focuses on a specific personal experience, I read widely in order to understand the greater social, cultural, economic and historical context of the event.

Mitchell & Piggitt note that 'the study of disasters should be a multidisciplinary exercise' (1977, p. 53), so my research included not only papers from a humanities/social sciences perspective, but also geology, engineering, psychology and health. This article also discusses how everybody in an affected community has stories and legends about disasters, and this is certainly true for the Newcastle earthquake. Furthermore, this article also stresses the importance of oral histories, so in addition to Lesley Salem, I conducted oral histories from George Salem, Sue Salem, and Merryana Willing.

Yin et al. (2011) gave me insights into the experiences of nurses on the frontlines of disasters, and the description of cannulation comes from their findings that intravenous insertion was one of the top skills required in such situations. Rynn et al. (1992) and Blong et al. (1990) provided excellent engineering and geological descriptions of the physical and structural effects of the earthquake, including the exact damage to the Workers Club. Anderson & Cotton (1992) describe the human context of the disaster, and their descriptions of the immediate psychological/emotional reactions to the disaster heavily informed my writing of such emotions in the piece, particularly feelings of shock, numbness and helplessness. Henry (1991) and Spennemann & Graham (2007) helped me understand the context of loss of heritage buildings. This ended up not featuring as heavily in the story as I had hoped, since it was not relevant to the protagonist, but these articles gave me excellent context for conducting oral histories. Hamilton (1999) outlined the difference between the way a disaster is reported and the way it is remembered, particularly who is left out, which also helped with examining oral histories. From West (2000), I drew understandings of natural disasters' effect on Australian national identity, and parallels with 'war zones'.

My greatest resource was newspaper articles and television news footage from the time, which helped me visualise the events of the day and provided countless details (e.g. bus strike, BHP layoffs, Workers Club full of pensioners, ongoing rescue search, San Francisco quake, ambulances from Sydney, and more).

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