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STRATHFIELD MASSACRE 1991

By Cathy Jones

The 'Strathfield Massacre' occurred on Saturday August 17 1991 at Strathfield Plaza and is considered one of Australia's worst and most violent crimes. Within a ten minute period, 33 year old Wade Frankum armed with an AK-47 rifle, knife and machete, killed seven people and seriously injured six other people before turning the gun on himself.

Strathfield Plaza is located on Churchill Avenue opposite Strathfield Rail Station and is the largest shopping complex in the Strathfield Town Centre. The Strathfield Plaza complex opened in 1981 consisting of an office tower, residential tower and single storey shopping centre. In 1991, the Strathfield Plaza shopping centre contained a supermarket, cafes, chemist, newsagency and a number of specialty shops.

There are two ground floor entrances on The Boulevard and Churchill Avenue and above the shopping centre, two floors of parking. Saturday afternoons at Strathfield Plaza were often busy as many people would meet for lunch or coffee or do their weekly grocery shopping. Being close to a large railway station, with country services, it was a popular place for people to meet or stop while waiting for transport.

On Saturday August 17 1991 around 1pm, Wade Frankum arrived at Strathfield Plaza carrying a bag with a rifle and a recently sharpened knife. Frankum was a part-time taxi driver with no criminal record or history of serious mental illness, though he had recently suffered depression due to his mother's suicide and financial difficulties. He obtained a gun licence and bought a semi-automatic rifle in the months prior.

Frankum sat in a café called The Coffee Pot and drank a number of cups of coffee until about 3.30pm. At this time, he rose and without any apparent provocation, pulled a large knife from an



Figure 1 Front page of Sun Herald August 1991

duffel bag and repeatedly stabbed fifteen year old Roberta 'Bo' Armstrong, who had been sitting with a friend at the Coffee Pot. Bob Yardy, owner of the cake shop next to the Coffee Pot, said 'I thought at first he was stabbing a couch but then I turned back and saw this young woman slump forward'.

Frankum then grabbed the semi-automatic rifle, loaded it and began shooting widely at other people in the café including sixty-one year old Joyce Nixon, her daughter Patricia Rowe and grandsons Kevin (14 years) and Nathan (8 years). Joyce and Patricia died shielding the young boys from Frankum's gunfire.

As George Mavis, the owner of the Coffee Pot, emerged from the kitchen, Frankum aimed his gun and killed him. George's brother James followed from the kitchen to see his brother fall to the floor.

Frankum then turned to other people in the Coffee Pot, Carole Dickinson, her daughter Belinda and Carole's niece Rachelle Milburn. Frankum shot Rachelle in the head and then shot Carole in the stomach. She died later that night from her wounds. As Belinda ran from the cafe screaming, Frankum shot her. Though she fell after being shot, she survived.

Frankum then left the Coffee Pot and started running through the Plaza wildly firing the gun. Fifty-three-year-old accountant Robertson Kan Hock Joon was looking at a set of photos when Frankum shot him. Throughout the centre, people were running frantically from the building to escape. Frankum then ran towards the outside stairway to the rooftop carpark while shooting at people as he ran. A volley of shots rang out across Strathfield Square and hit the nearby railway ticket office, a milk bar and the window of a taxi.

Forty-one-year-old Greg Read , an ex-Navy officer who had served in Vietnam, raced up the stairs at Strathfield Plaza screaming to people to "hit the deck" with Frankum just metres behind him. Read said:

"I heard shots when I was in the newsagency and I raced out. I saw everybody running and a lady screamed 'Look out. A man's gone berserk with a gun'. The shots started coming towards me. I could see he was running to get out of the building. I raced up the stairs while he ran up the ramp. As I was running he was shooting at everybody indiscriminately. I was in front of him by about 20 feet (six metres). I could hear all the shots. They were very loud. I reached the carpark first and told a couple to hit the deck. Then, as I warned a woman driving out of the carpark to lie low, she said: 'It's too late. He's already behind you'. I turned and he was just a couple of metres away. I dived under the car and that's how I got shot in the feet. Looking over the barrel of his gun, I guess you could say I had eye contact with him".

Police estimated that Read's actions saved at least eight people from death or injury. Read was awarded the Star of Courage in October 1992 for acts of conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril by the Australia's Governor-General. The Star of Courage is the second highest Australian bravery decoration.

By now, Frankum had reached the top floor of the carpark where he held Catherine Noyce at gunpoint, demanding that she drive him to Enfield, a nearby suburb. Before she could start her car, police began to arrive on the scene. Flemington constable Darren Stewart was the first police officer to arrive at the scene. Constable Stewart said 'I sprinted to a police car and raced to the scene. When I arrived the guy was still firing. He was on a car park roof firing shots into crowds, firing up to 100 metres'. Hearing the approaching sirens, Frankum said "I'm sorry' to Mrs Noyce and then got out of the car, knelt on the ground, and committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Constable Stewart said he heard a single shot ring out. I raced on to the car park roof and saw the gunman slumped on the ground in a pool of blood, with a bullet wound to the head'.



Figure 2 Strathfield Massacre Memorial Churchill Avenue Strathfield. Photo Cathy Jones 2016

Aftermath

Frankum's shooting spree had lasted 10 minutes. He killed seven people and injured six. None of his victims appeared to be personally known to him. No clear motive for the massacre was established, though a search of Frankum's apartment revealed dozens of violent books and magazines. Victims of the massacre included Roberta Armstrong, Robertson Kan Hock Voon, Patricia Rowe, Carole Dickinson, Joyce Nixon, Rachell Milburn and George Mavis.

The impact of the Strathfield Massacre on the local community was devastating. Many local residents were working or shopping at Strathfield Plaza or knew someone who was there. Many people witnessed the murders, hid or fled for their lives on the day, a memory that most have never forgotten. The businesses in the Strathfield Town Centre, following the incident, suffered a steep decline of income and patronage and many businesses moved out of Strathfield Plaza and the Strathfield Town Centre in the years after. A plaque commemorating the victims of the crime was later erected on Churchill Avenue by Strathfield Council.

Many articles have been written about the incident. There appears to be widespread interest in the investigation of the crime, motivations of the perpetrator and the impact of this incident on community attitudes to gun control and subsequent changes to gun control laws. This incident was pivotal in changing public attitudes to the need for gun control, especially semi-automatic weapons.

The death toll from the Port Arthur Massacre, five years after Strathfield in 1996, was worse than the Strathfield incident. The then newly elected Howard Federal Government took decisive actions on gun control in 2006 including buy-backs of weapons. Gun control has continued to have general public support.

Community actions

Following the incident, meetings were organised by the NSW Department of Community Services to develop a support network and counselling. The Strathfield Plaza Victims' Appeal was established by the State Member for Strathfield Paul Zammit MP. This raised a total of \$45,253.68.

Cheques were distributed to the seven persons injured and families of the victims. The then NSW Premier Nick Grenier stated that up to \$50,000 in compensation was available under the Victims Compensation Tribunal for those affected by the crime.

Memorial

The incident occurred on 17 August 1991. Strathfield Council called a special meeting on 20 August 1991 and adopted the following actions:

"Following the tragic events at Strathfield Plaza on Saturday 17 August 1991:

1. (a) Council arrange for floral tributes and letters of condolence to be sent to all families who lost loved ones or who were injured on the day.

(b) the Mayor issue a public statement offering Council's condolences to those people affected by the tragedy

(c) the Town Clerk make all necessary arrangements for a floral tribute to be placed in the Plaza and such tribute to be suitably inscribed and maintained for 1 month.

(d) the Town Clerk issue an appropriate letter to Mrs C A Noyes, of 5 Oxford Road, Strathfield, who suffered special trauma during the events of the day.

(e) the Town Clerk make appropriate investigations and enquiries on the desirability and location of a plaque to record the tragic events of the day and those who lost their lives.

2. Council make the strongest representations to the State Government to have all guns prohibited unless used by -

- Service personnel
- Police, or groups authorised by them, eg Security Guards
- Farmers
- Gun Clubs; and that firearms used by such Clubs be securely stored at Club premises or other secured premises all under the total control of Police.

The Council observed a minute silence as a mark of respect for the victims of the tragedy.

On Sunday 12pm-12.45pm, 8 September 1991, Council held an Ecumenical Church Service in Strathfield Square. Council worked with the State Member for Strathfield, Paul Zammit MP. To support the service, Council organised road closures, ceremonies and notified all affected shopkeepers, families of victims, local schools, local cultural, sporting and recreational clubs and organisations.

Strathfield Council resolved on 22 October 1991 to erect a memorial in the Strathfield Town Centre to commemorate the Strathfield Massacre. The plaque states:

"This tree was planted to remember those who were killed in Strathfield Plaza on Saturday 17 August 1991.

Roberta Armstrong

Carole Dickinson

George Mavris

Rachelle Milburn

Joyce Nixon

Patricia Rowe

Robertson Kan Hock Voon

This tree is a sign of our commitment to work for a more peaceful community".

The wording for the plaque was suggested by the Rev. Michael Barnes, Secretary of the Strathfield/Homebush Minister's Association.

In a report to Council dated 15 October 1991, the plaque is to be placed at the base of the tree that was subject of special significance and commemoration during the Commemorative Service on 8 September 1991.

The memorial was designed by Council staff. The memorial was refreshed in 2011 by Strathfield Council.

Annual Commemorative Service

Since 2008, Strathfield Council has formalised an annual service on or near the anniversary in August. The attendance of memorial ceremonies is generally invitation only. The ceremony is attended by members of Council and invited guests, including victims and families (where contact information is available). Around the anniversary, flowers have often been privately placed on the plaque.

The speech given by the Deputy Mayor, Cr Andrew Soulos, who presided at the 2015 ceremony, said:

"On this day, August 17 1991, the Strathfield community and Strathfield Council remembers one of the darkest moments in our history and a day still remembered by long-term local residents.

Strathfield Council, on behalf of the Strathfield community, would today like to take this moment to remember the victims who lost their lives and the injured who suffered, and give our deepest sympathies to the families who were affected by this tragedy.

We give thanks for those who survived and gratitude to the onlookers and emergency services personnel who were brave in the face of mankind's worst. In their memory."

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Note

This article was first written by Cathy Jones in 2011 but was revised in 2016 and 2020.