

Detention centre scandal

What really happened to a girl in care

Following is the story of what happened to the girl referred to on Page 1.

Bruce Grundy

ON May 24, 1988, a slightly built Aboriginal girl in custody was taken with a group of boys and five non-custodial staff on an outing entitled "Socialisation within a Natural Environment". The girl had just turned 14.

The group left the John Oxley Youth Detention Centre in Wacol some time after 8am and arrived at the carpark at the Mt Barney National Park near the New South Wales border about 10.30am.

The objective for this socialisation excursion was still a rugged hour-and-a-half's walk away through the bush, up and down the ridges and across the gullies that lay between the car park and two, very isolated, boulder strewn waterholes known as the Lower Portals.

One bushwalking web site says the trek may be only 3.7 kilometres but it will feel like 10.

Which it does.

There is an information poster at the car park which quotes the words of a local Aboriginal woman. The area is taboo, off-limits, to Aboriginal women, the poster says.

The party set off from the car park and soon began to string out through the bush. Three of the staff, two women and one of the men, became lost.

When the girl arrived at the waterholes she was in the company of five boys and two men.

The boulders that surround the pools have been water-washed since time began and are as slippery as glass.

The girl slipped and fell into the water.

She was told to take her wet jeans off.

She was then wearing just a tee-shirt and panties.

There is only one small flat area of ground at the Lower Portals – where everyone had lunch.

However, from this position there is a very limited view of the surroundings and that only downstream. There is no view upstream at all because of an abutment of rock that overhangs the flat ground.

By the time the lost party arrived the others had eaten their lunch and the youngsters were allowed to wander off – out of sight. Upstream.

When it was noticed they were nowhere to be seen, some of the men set off in search.

When after 20 minutes or thereabouts the group is discovered, one of the male staff members becomes suspicious that the girl had been sexually assaulted.

The party is rounded up for the return trek to the car park. Along the way the man's suspicions about what had happened to the girl are shared with the other staff members.

Back at the car park four of the boys visit the bush toilet there.

Shortly afterwards one of the staff goes to see what is keeping them.

He discovers the boys have "absconded" – disappeared into the bush.

Some frantic efforts are then made to get them to come back, without success. Two of the staff, the girl, and the remaining boy set off in one of the vehicles to raise the alarm.

They call the Rathdowney police from a farmhouse, meet the police (but it seems they do not mention anything about what might have happened to the girl) and return to John Oxley.

What exactly happened back at the car park is difficult to tell.

Some of the reports are confusing.

However, a couple of hours later the rest of the party returns with the boys who absconded.

When they reach John Oxley the boys become difficult to control and the manager is called.

Eventually the staff member's suspicions of what had happened to the girl are passed on to him.

It is agreed the staff should reconvene the following morning at 9am to discuss the day's events.

By this time the girl is asleep and she is not woken.

Next morning she is spoken to and says she wants action taken against the boys because of what had happened the previous day.

By now the word had spread.

Some of other girls in the centre are displeased with the news. Not with their boy-friends for what they had done, but with the girl. She is assaulted.

A staff member becomes aware of what is happening to her, reports the matter and is sent to ensure her safety.

A doctor is contacted by telephone and over the phone prescribes the girl a "morning after" dosage of a contraceptive pill.

The staff prepare reports and eventually, three days later, the police are contacted.

The police say the girl should be examined by a doctor and she is taken to the Mater Hospital.

The examining doctor records the girl telling her she had struggled but two of the boys raped her while the others kept a look out.

Next morning the police arrive and speak with her.

She also speaks with some of the staff and before leaving the police record in their notebooks, which they get the girl to sign, that she does not want any further action taken.

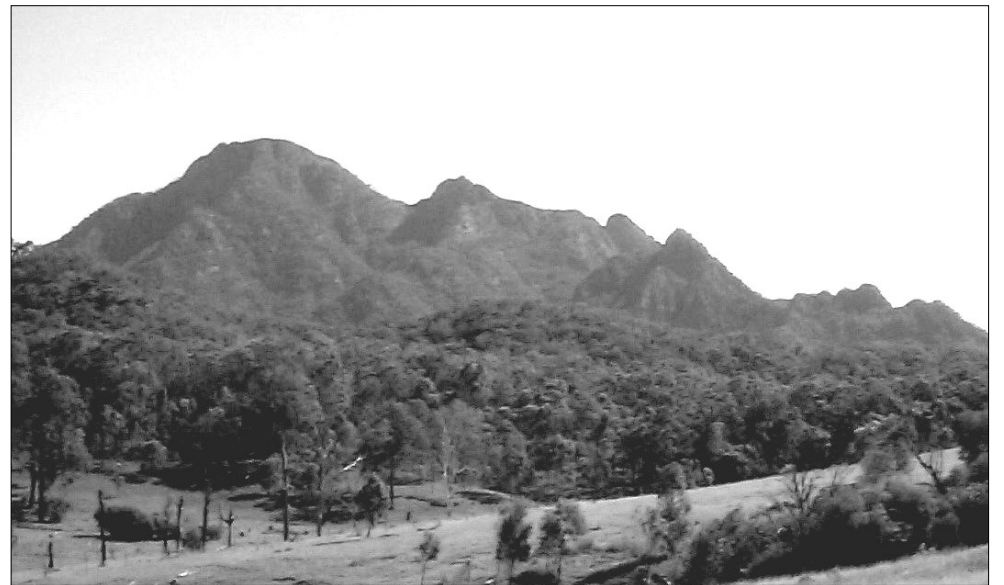
The staff record that she made this decision because of the time it would take for the matter to come to court and because she was being threatened in connection with what happened at the Lower Portals.

There are no records of any suggestion that the girl might be removed to a safe environment.

Reports are prepared for senior officers and eventually the Minister of the day is advised that a girl was "interfered with" on a picnic but it is unlikely she will fall pregnant, although there is a chance the media may get hold of the story.

And that was the end of the matter.

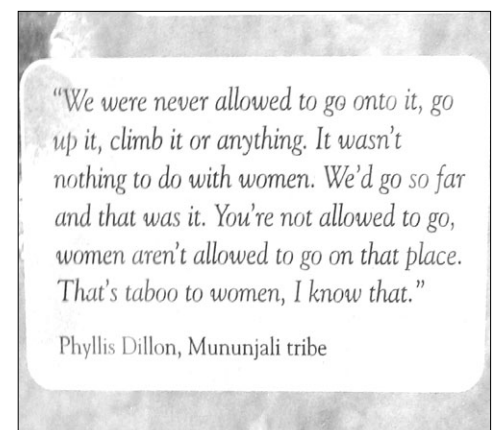
As we now know, the media did get hold of the story 10 months later and reported it as an allegation that a 15 year-old-girl had been raped on an art excursion.



Mount Barney near the New South Wales border ... location of the Lower Portals



Warning sign at the start of the trek



Car park information poster revealing the area is 'taboo' to Aboriginal women



Where a 14-year-old girl in her undies was left unsupervised with a group of boys



The bush toilet where four of the boys 'absconded'

The Minister at the time said he had been advised the girl was 17, not 15 (i.e. over the age of consent) and that while she had been encouraged to press the matter, she and her mother had decided not to do so.

Scores of people would have known that that was not the case.

But no one said boo.

And the two stories published on March 17 and 18, 1989, lay buried for 15 years.

Six months after the stories appeared, a third Minister established an inquiry in the centre.

Shortly after that there was a change of government, the inquiry was shut down and all the evidence it had gathered was shredded.

One of the staff at the centre has said when he was interviewed by the inquiry he was questioned about the pack rape incident.

Whatever his testimony was, it went down the shredder along with that of everyone else who was interviewed.

Since then other girls have told of being raped in that centre.

Editor's note: When my first story on what had happened to this girl appeared, the Criminal Justice Commission was asked to investigate. The CJC Chairman said there was no official misconduct involved because "at the time" the police had been called and the girl had been examined by a doctor. However, neither of these things happened "at the time" ... they didn't happen for three days!