

# RETURN TO BANGKA ISLAND

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This is a story many of you may be familiar with – that of the nurse POW's in WW2. There are many stories of courage and heroism in Australian history. Sometimes those stories are associated with myth, which then becomes woven into our Australian culture. Sometimes there is a vast difference between the myth and reality. Let me share this story with you, have a think about the story you know. See what you think, what you may know of the story, and the reality of the women.

In 1993 six Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps officers including myself had an extraordinary experience – to travel to Bangka Island, one of the many islands in the Indonesian archipelago. The purpose of our visit was to accompany a group of seven elderly women – all nurses, who had been prisoners of war following the fall of Singapore in 1942.

Also accompanying this group were other military nurses who were stationed in Singapore at the time of the fall, relatives and friends of those women.

We gathered to dedicate a memorial as a tribute to their sacrifice and that of their colleagues.

We left Australia on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1993, and nurses from different towns throughout Australia began to

gather in Jakarta. The excitement of the trip and all it promised was evident amongst the women.

There was a lot of catching up with old friends, some had not seen each other for some time; inquiries were made into the reasons a particular friend could not make the journey. Was it due to ill health, and how was so-and-so going? We began to develop a sense of the strong bonds that existed between these nurses.

When we left Jakarta to travel to Bangka Is, the mood changed as the purpose of the trip took the women closer to their memories. With this, they began to share their story with us. They talked about their nightmare escape from Singapore. While some of the evacuees eventually made it to safety, others were to become POWs of the Japanese.

This is the story they told.

When Japan entered WWII in 1942, conditions in the military hospitals in the South Pacific changed dramatically. Already stretched to capacity, the torrential flow of casualties threatened to become overwhelming.

At this time, there were over 100 Australian military nurses from three medical units, which all formed part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division. The hospitals were located in Malaya and were ordered back to Singapore Island. Conditions became steadily worse. Staff

found themselves working under dreadful conditions. There was no electricity, water or gas, and the daily bombings began about 4am. While hospitals did not seem to be a target, direct strikes did occur.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1942, the order came for all the nurses to evacuate Singapore. They were devastated as they faced the agonising reality of abandoning many of the wounded soldiers to an unknown and possibly merciless enemy.

Three vessels were used in the evacuation, all hastily refitted as hospital ships, yet ill-designed for the purpose. As fate would decree, the destiny of the nurses on each of the three ships was wildly different.

The first ship to leave, the *Wah Sui*, sailed on the 10<sup>th</sup> February. Of the nearly 350 passengers, there were six nurses and 47 patients. Given the difficult conditions in Singapore, the wounded evacuated on the 1<sup>st</sup> ship where the most urgent cases. Although bombed during embarkation whilst in Singapore Harbour, the vessel escaped serious damage and reached Batavia (now Jakarta) relatively unscathed. Within a few weeks the nurses were safely returned to Australia.

With 2hrs notice to move, 59 nurses left with the 2<sup>nd</sup> ship, the *Empire Star*, on the 11<sup>th</sup> February. The *Empire Star* was a cargo ship designed to carry 24 passengers, yet she left Singapore with over 2000

people crammed into her holds, berths and massed across the decks. Among the evacuees were Australian, British and Indian nurses, British troops and civilian women and children.

During its passage, Japanese bombers heavily bombarded the ship. Despite zig zagging the ship through treacherous waters, they had three direct hits resulting in damage to the ship and significant loss of life.

The nurses established First Aid posts and cared as best they could for the approximately 30 wounded, but facilities were limited and two of the injured died from their wounds. The ship somehow limped into Batavia. Following repairs, the *Empire Star* eventually reached Australia without further incident.

There they waited expectantly for the arrival of the remaining nurses, unaware that they had already experienced the worst luck of all.

The last ship to leave Singapore was the *Vyner Brooke*. She sailed on the 12<sup>th</sup> February, vastly overcrowded and with little in the way of effective defences. She carried 65 Australian nurses led by the redoubtable Matrons Paschke and Drummond.

They organised the nurses into teams with responsibilities for the various areas of the ship. Should the ship come under fire, the nurses were instructed that their priority would rest with tending

the wounded. Should the order be given to abandon ship, the nurses knew they would be the last to leave.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February at about 2pm Japanese planes attacked the *Vyner Brooke*. They had sailed 260 miles from Singapore. Six enemy planes made short work of the small coastal steamer when one bomb plummeted straight down the funnel into the engine room. The bombings were followed by machine gun fire as the Japanese planes returned to wreak further havoc.

She sank within 15 mins of the first strike. Evacuation of the ship was made chaotic as panic took over. Many had not survived the bombings, and still more were wounded. Lifeboats were rendered useless, full of bullet holes, and others fell when launched, crushing survivors already in the water. As it happened, only one lifeboat remained afloat, and it carried the wounded.

For those who survived the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, some were to spend up to 65 hrs in the water before making it to shore. For one group in the water, they were nearly run down by a Japanese warship. Not aware of what lay ahead of them, one commented that she did not want to be rescued by the Japanese anyway.

The survivors, a motley group of about 70 soldiers, civilian men and women, and the nurses, drifted

ashore to Bangka Is, some guided by a fire lit on the beach by those who had reached there earlier.

One large group of about 50 people surrendered to Japanese soldiers on the 16<sup>th</sup> February. Here they separated the men and women. The men were led away to a beach behind a bluff and machine gunned, bayonets finishing where the bullets had failed.

The remaining women were ordered to line up and walk towards the water, where they were also machine-gunned. Only one survived, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel. Although wounded, she feigned death until she felt certain the Japanese had left the beach.

Driven by a desperate need to survive, Vivian hid in nearby undergrowth. During this time, she happened upon a wounded British soldier, who despite a large shrapnel wound to his arm, and two bayonet wounds, had survived the massacre of the men. Vivian was dismayed to see that his wounds already showed signs of infection. She nursed him as best she could, but soon faced the gnawing realisation that he would not survive without urgent medical attention.

She was forced to make a decision that she knew could risk certain death for both of them. There was however a slim chance that surrender to the Japanese may mean survival for both of them.

To surrender to an enemy who had shown no mercy filled Vivian enormous dread. However, as she and the wounded soldier made their way towards Muntok, they met an Indonesian man who spoke English. He inquired as to where they were going. When Vivian indicated they were to surrender to the Japanese, he agreed that was the best thing. He passed on the news that the Japanese had internment camps at Muntok, and there were women there wearing the grey uniform and Red Cross armbands, as she was. This, Vivian reasoned, meant that not only were the Japanese taking prisoners, but that some of her nursing colleagues were alive.

Upon surrender, Vivian was taken to the Muntok POW camp where she rejoined the remaining nurses who survived this ordeal. Once the other nurses heard of the massacre, it was quickly agreed that the incident would never be mentioned again in the camp – for fear of what may happen to Vivian. And so the nurses set about to make the best of what was to be four different locations for women's POW camps over the duration of the war.

In 1993, when our group returned to Bangka Island, we travelled to Radji Beach, the scene of the massacre. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March the memorial was unveiled. It overlooks the waters, where some 10 miles out the *Vyner Brooke* was sunk. The plaque lists the names of those lost at sea, shot and killed and those who died in the POW camps. Also

named are the nurses who eventually returned to Australia. A stone from their former Muntok POW camp is embedded in a memorial.

At this site, a quite and dignified ceremony was conducted. Despite their advanced years, and in some cases frailty, each of the POW nurses contributed, some reading passages from the Bible, others offering prayers from the heart.

It was a long day, the day the memorial was unveiled. Our motel was located on the opposite side of the island, and travel to the site was made slow because of the poor condition of the roads. We eventually returned at 10pm. The nurses however, could not rest. The day had meant so much to them, they were keen to sit and talk, examining every detail with ruthless precision.

On our return to Jakarta, we visited the Menteng Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery. In this cemetery are the graves of the 8 nurses who died in captivity. Sadly, the majority of them succumbed to the combined effects of malaria, dysentery and malnutrition only months before the end of the war.

On our return trip we left Indonesia and the party travelled to Singapore. Those nurses who were lost at sea and those massacred at Bangka Island, remembered by name at Kranji War Cemetery, were likewise honoured and remembered by the survivors and relatives who visited the cemetery.

The return to Bangka Island was a defining experience not only for the seven nurse survivors, but also for the nurses who sailed on the *Empire Star* and for many of the relatives of the nurses.

I think in some ways we were all unprepared for the outpouring of grief for some of the participants. One woman told me that one of the nurses massacred on the Beach had been her beloved aunt. Although she was only a young girl at the time of her aunt's death, for 51 years she had held that grief and sense of loss close to her.

What became apparent to me is that it doesn't really matter how far you are from an event – there is a healing effect of returning for a memorial, the remembering, and acknowledging within an appropriate ceremony.

The drive for the memorial had resulted from a chance meeting when Vivian Bullwinkel attended a reception in 1992 for the Indonesian Ambassador to Australia. At the function one of the Ambassadors' aids made mention of development plans for Bangka Island. He was surprised to learn that Vivian knew the island well, and listened with interest to her story.

Later she was introduced to a successful businessman, born on Bangka Island who had been involved in several development projects. He offered to assist in any way he could. Events moved quickly, and soon the Department of

Veteran's Affairs advised Vivian that support from the Indonesian and Australian governments had been given for the building of a memorial.

So that chance meeting led to this extraordinary journey. While the return had a deep and special meaning for each of the nurses, they showed warm generosity in sharing their experiences with us.

They described in particular the dire conditions they experienced in Singapore when they attempted to nurse over 1000 wounded soldiers in a facility designed for 200. They evoked images of nursing at night with no light, but still vast numbers of critical patients whose needs remained just as desperate regardless of the time. They described nursing dying and severely wounded men with almost no supplies, lacking even the barest of basics.

We could feel their sorrow at having to leave the wounded behind in the face of the oncoming enemy. To this day they believe this to have been the ultimate neglect of their duty.

The stories of their experiences in the camps left us with little doubt as to the horrors they endured. Their will to live, their incredible ability to survive through wit and imagination was almost overwhelming. One nurse came ashore on Bangka Island with a lipstick in her pocket. She described to me how she had used it as a wound dressing, the only thing she had.

Mostly the nurses arrived with only their clothes on their back, not even shoes – they had taken them off when they jumped off the *Vyner Brooke*. They had to work hard for the extras, which were in fact the necessities of life. Scooping out the toilet pits with coconut shells, smuggling in desperately needed medications, and bribing guards for food was part of their daily grind. When I asked one nurse where she thought this ability to survive came from, she shrugged her shoulders and simply replied, “you just do it”.

Despite the depravations and sorrows, their recollections were also characterised by humour and joy. Some of the nurses joined the camp choir which brought them relief from their bleak routine. There was some coy mention of the odd “fist-a-cuffs”; disputes over ownership of precious possession or smoke from a cooking fire blowing the wrong way.

With all these experiences shared it was apparent to me that comradeship is a common theme for survivors: there is a desperate need to survive, but to survive together.

Sadly, the ranks of these indomitable women are thinning. The stories of their incredible courage reinforces in me the belief that my service as a military nurse should embody my tribute to their tremendous dedication and sacrifice. They went to war in such uncertain times, the only certainty lay in doing their duty. Their conditions were so vastly

different to those experienced by military nurses deployed as peacekeepers today. Despite having had overseas operational experience myself, I remain humbled by their strengths.

Yet there is a common bond, undiminished by the years, which lies in the utter strength of their commitment and is a value dearly cherished by nurses today.