

HUMILIATED, ILL-TREATED AND STARVED

From G. E. W. Harriot

Sister Nesta Jones, of Melbourne, a tiny woman—she is five feet nothing, painfully thin, with peaked face and dead-tired—demonstrated her indomitable spirit when I asked her first how the Japanese had behaved towards them. She looked at me with a wry smile and remarked, "They were rather tantalising at times."

Here is her story, told quietly, without emphasis and with a good deal of understatement—

"There were 65 of us then. There are 24 of us now. The Vyner Brooke, hit repeatedly, sank in a very short time. We nurses took to the water and swam and drifted, clinging to bits of wreckage. Finally, the waves and currents flung me ashore on Bangka Island. I was in the water for 12 hours, but some other nurses for more than 24.

"While we were in the water, Japanese planes machine-gunned us repeatedly, but none of us was hit."

Sister Jones and 30 other nurses landed at a different part of the beach from the other 22 and thus escaped the massacre.

"Would Prefer to Die"

Picked up by Japanese, they were taken to the coolie lines, where they were kept in dreadful conditions for a month.

They were then taken to Sumatra, separated and housed in quite decent bungalows.

"We were there also for a month," Sister Jones said, "and it was the worst month of the whole three and a half years.

"We were unprotected, and Japanese soldiers walked into our bungalows at will at any hour of the day and night.

"There were no cases of rape, but I think I can leave it to your imagination what else was done to us.

"Shortly after our arrival, we were called in separately to a room where there were Japanese officers. I went in first and a Japanese officer told me: 'You must work for the Japanese Army.' He left me in no doubt whatever what that work would be. His suggestions were detailed, not delicate.

"I replied: 'Nursing is my only work.'

"The officer shouted again: 'You must work for the Japanese Army.'

"I repeated my refusal.

"The officer then said: 'Then you will starve. There will be no food for you. How would you like to

will starve. There will be no food for you. How would you like to die?'

"I answered: 'We would prefer to die.'

"At a later interview, we were told a Japanese officers' club had been opened at Muntok, and we were expected to 'entertain' officers of the Imperial Japanese Army. We refused. Every possible form of pressure was brought to bear on us to make us agree. Some of the forms I would prefer not to talk about.

"The Japanese were in and out of our bungalows all day, constantly harping on the theme of our becoming officers' prostitutes. All sorts of advances were made to us and all sorts of liberties taken.

"The mental strain was terrific. We lived in constant fear that they would use force where persuasion failed, but they did not.

"After about a month of this, a high Japanese official got to hear about it and took immediate steps to have it stopped."

Taken to Palembang, the nurses were put to work in a hospital, some nursing, some on menial work, until about the middle of 1943.

Their worst time came when they were moved to the Lahat area, where they had to work from dawn to dusk, under the blazing sun, with

picks and hoes, clearing an area for gardens. With hands raw and blistered they worked day in and day out. When the gardens were completed, they were turned into water-carriers, carrying buckets in endless relays half a mile each way.

Weak, But Proud

"We were weak and exhausted," said Sister Jones, "but we were too proud to let them see us down, and we kept going. They could not understand, and we got the absolute minimum of food—a little rice, a few jungle vegetables, and very rarely scraps of meat. Consequently, we were all suffering from malnutrition, and most of us were ill with malaria, dysentery, and beri-beri.

"When we committed 'offences' the punishment was to stand us at attention for hours in the burning sun. On one occasion, two sisters, one of them very ill with a heart condition, were forced to stand for hours in the sun until finally the sick sister collapsed. She subsequently died.

"Eight of our nurses died, mainly from sheer starvation and overwork. We had to bury them ourselves.

"I cannot pay too high a tribute to the spirit of our girls. They never gave up. They never lost hope. They never gave the Japanese the satisfaction of seeing them beaten."

Sister J. G. Doyle, of Springfield Avenue, Potts Point, told a similar story.

Avenue, Potts Point, told a similar story.

For the first time in three and a half years the nurses slept last night between sheets.

They are in the 214 Australian General Hospital at Singapore.

The C.O. of the hospital, Colonel Langford, said it was difficult to say when the girls would leave for Australia.

"In a week," he said, "you won't know them. In a fortnight or three weeks they should all be pretty fit again."