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The following recollections by Phyllis (Briggs) Thom were originally produced by Bournemouth Libraries for the BBC's *WW2 People's War* which is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar

PART ONE - ALOR STAR, MALAYA

At the beginning of December 1941 I was one of four nursing sisters at the General Hospital in Alor Star, which is the capital of the State of Kedah in North Malaya.

Our work was most interesting. We looked after people of numerous races; chiefly Malays, Chinese and Indians, but we had a few Europeans too. The nurses in training were local girls. There were also a number of male nurses known as "dressers". Many of the patients had tropical diseases such as malaria, beri-beri and yaws. There was a busy maternity ward and some lunatic cells, so we had a variety of work.

Some British Army officers and RAF personnel were stationed near Alor Star and we had quite a gay time when off duty. They asked us to numerous parties and dances, and we also played golf and badminton. On our days off we sometimes drove down to Butterworth, some 60 miles away, then over onto the ferry to Penang Island. I had many friends there and we used to go to the swimming club where there was a lovely view of Kedah Peak across the water. Sometimes we had picnics on one of the beautiful beaches.

All this came to a sudden end on Monday 8th December. Japanese aircraft came over in waves and dropped bombs quite near us. Our few British planes went up to attack them but were hopelessly out numbered. We heard anti-aircraft fire; then there was silence.

Suddenly an ambulance arrived. In it was Pongo Scarf, a young RAF officer we knew well. His plane had crash-landed in a nearby field and he was badly wounded. His wife Sally was one of our nursing sisters. She offered her blood for transfusion but it was too late. She left Alor Star before his burial.

I was determined that Pongo would be buried properly. We managed to get a coffin from the jail. Another sister came with me in my Morris 8 and we followed the ambulance bearing his coffin to the local cemetery, where a grave had been dug. On our way we met two Army padres driving towards us. I stopped the car and asked if they would come with us to say a prayer. Later when I saw Sally I could tell her that we had done all we could.

All the European women were told to leave and go south, though hospital staff remained another four days. We heard that some Japs had parachuted into Malaya and some had crossed the Siamese border and were already behind the British and Indian lines. Our matron said we must barricade windows and doors at night as the enemy could easily creep into our unlocked wooden bungalows.

December 11th and 12th were dreadful days, for we hardly had any sleep with air raids and casualties being brought in at all hours. The guns firing, shaking the house, joined the constant noise of trucks rumbling by as the army retreated. Most of our patients were sent home; any remaining being evacuated by putting onto lorries and sending south to other hospitals. One motherless baby I handed to an Indian amah as no relations came to collect it.

Most of the local inhabitants fled from Alor Star. Many of them piled all their belongings into carts or old cars, with mattresses on the roof as protection, but often planes swooped down and machine-gunned these unfortunate people. Workers in the outlying paddy-fields and men digging trenches near the hospital were also shot down. Faring best were

those who followed the Government Order: "Pergi ulu" (go into the jungle). They didn't attempt to return to their homes until the bombers had gone.

We nursing sisters were told to pack two suitcases and be ready for the password "Curtain fallen". Hearing this over the telephone we were to drop everything and go. This we did on the evening of December 12th. I took one of the other girls with me in my small car and we went in convoy south to Kulim.

PART TWO - OVERLAND TO SINGAPORE

Leaving Alor Star on 12th December 1941, we stayed overnight in Mr. Bradley's house - four to a bed. Due to the blackout we hardly knew what was going on, but before dawn we were told to "beat it".

Evelyn Cowans joined us, she had been a sister in Penang before marrying a rubber planter and her husband had joined the Volunteer Force.

We set off for Taiping, the road jammed with refugees. There were burnt out cars and rickshaws along the way, local buses were crammed with people; others were pushing bicycles piled high with belongings.

The hospital sisters in Taiping were very kind to us. We worked in the military hospital, set up in the school, which was very short staffed. At first we were given simple menial tasks to do as we were "civilian sisters"- but later when so many casualties were brought in from the front the Q.A. sisters were only too glad of our help.

Several trucks with British and American troops arrived in Taiping having driven straight from the fighting. The men were worn out and dejected, saying it was hopeless to try and hold back the Japs, who swarmed out of the jungle. The radio repeatedly said that the Japs would be held back as the bridge over the Perak had been blown up, but by this time the Japs had already crossed it!

After only three days we were told to leave again, this time for Ipoh; but when we got there the whole town looked deserted. We found out that there had been a bad air raid the night before and managed to get some food at the Railway Hotel.I had my tank filled up by a European who was giving it away. We stayed the night with Bobby Brooke, he was in a dreadful state as his wife, Wendy, had left for Singapore with most of the other British women.

On Wednesday 17th December we set off for Kuala Lumpur. A nursing sister called Pat Boxell was determined to save her husband's car, although she did not drive well, and as we went along a winding road with a steep drop on the left, the car left the road and plunged down the bank. Fortunately, although there was no hope of getting the car back on the road, Pat and the Chinese amah she had with her managed to scramble out and were picked up by Celia Taylor, a Domestic Science teacher from Taiping.

The road was crowded with traffic, all going south and we could only creep along but my little Morris 8 ran smoothly all the way. Finally we reached Kuala Lumpur, I felt very tired and can only remember a nice old Chinese amah showing me a bed and I just fell into it.

The next day some of the sisters and nurses went on to Singapore, a few of us were sent to the hospital in Seremban. The hospital was filled to overflowing with wounded soldiers, although normally this was a civilian hospital. Soon we began having air raids and Matron Hardy, who I had known in Penang, had her little dog put to sleep as it became almost hysterical when the planes came over. There were no celebrations for Christmas as we were all working long hours. I had a camp bed in Jenny MacAlister's room. She was engaged to a rubber planter and was getting ready for her wedding. Little did she realise that it would be nearly four years before they could get married. Most of the European women had left for Singapore but a number remained behind to help the hospital and they did a wonderful job.

January 10th 1942. The army told us all to leave for Singapore and the wounded soldiers were put on a train and sent to the Alexandria Hospital. Once more I set off in my little car and took Mary Gentles with me. We drove through Johore in the pouring rain and it was difficult to see - the roof leaked and poor old Gentles put up her purple umbrella in the car! Mary Gentles was one of a number of nursing sisters who were drowned when their ships were sunk.

We reached Singapore General Hospital the same evening; by this time most of the sisters from hospitals in Malaya had reached Singapore. We all felt tired and had a few days rest before being sent to work in one or other of the hospitals.

I was asked to work in the Kandang Kerban hospital and moved into the Sister's Quarters with my few belongings. In normal times it was a maternity hospital but now it was used for air raid victims. I began to work in the resuscitation ward. This was filled with Malays, Chinese, and Indians all brought in direct from the streets. Many were already dead, others were dying. To these hopeless cases we gave large doses of morphia and wrote the amount given on a strip of plaster which we stuck on their foreheads. Those with a chance of recovery we sent up to the wards when a bed could be found for them.

I was put in charge of the acute surgical ward. We were terribly busy and the doctors operated day and night - Mr. Laurie, Eliot Fisher and Dr. Shields. They were splendid to work with and we all got on well. At first we used to put the patients under their beds during the raids, but it became impossible to do when the raids became frequent.

By this time men, women, children and servicemen were being admitted to the same wards and some were on the floor. During the raids many Chinese jumped into the monsoon drains by the road sides. They put their heads down and bottoms up - with the result that many Chinese were brought into hospital with shrapnel wounds to their buttocks. Some of the patients had infected wounds crawling with maggots. It was the one thing that made me feel quite sick. One Chinese woman had half her face blown

away. I have never forgotten her pleading eyes. Large maggots were crawling out of what was left of her nose.

PART THREE - FLIGHT AND CAPTURE

On 31st January the Causeway was blown up because the Japs had reached S. Johore. It was difficult to get any rest at night as the bombing and explosions made so much noise. Everyone was very depressed and people were being evacuated from Singapore by every available ship - most of them going to Australia. The guns sounded much nearer and some terrible burn cases were brought in from the ship "Empress of Asia".

On 8th February there was a terrific barrage all night as the Japs attempted to land on Singapore Island. There was so much work to do on the wards it was becoming impossible to cope with everything. The home sister was finding it difficult to get enough fruit and vegetables to feed the staff and we were told that there might be a water shortage as the pipelines got hit.

Tony Cochrane reached Singapore and was stationed at the Naval Base. I saw him briefly a few times and he asked me to marry him as soon as we met again in Australia. He made me promise to leave Singapore as soon as I could.

On Tuesday night, Matron called us together and told us that any nursing sister who wished to leave could do so the next day. Some of the married sisters left. It was a big decision for us to make and one wanted to do the right thing. It would have been far easier if we had been told that a number of volunteers were required to stay. On the 12th I said I would leave if there was another ship.

That day a number of Ghurka soldiers came into the hospital. They had marched many miles and had been fighting for days on end. These tough little men were completely exhausted; they simply lay down in the passage and fell asleep. The St. John’s Ambulance people were doing a fine job. After each raid they set out to bring in the

wounded. The main entrance of the hospital was crowded with people patiently waiting to have their wounds treated. Guns were placed in the hospital compound manned by British troops and there was the shattering sound of gunfire all day and night.

On Friday 13th February, a car came to take us to the docks; I collected my suitcases, all the time wondering if I was doing the right thing. However I got into the car and we drove to the Wharf and climbed into a crowded launch. There were three ships in the harbour and we were taken to each in turn and told that they were already overcrowded and could not take us on board. I was quite pleased as I felt dreadful about leaving the hospital. However just as we were about to get out of the launch the first ship signalled that they could take us after all, so we boarded the Mata Hari at about 7pm.

Despite the romantic name she was merely a cargo ship with a scratch crew collected from vessels which had been sunk. She had accommodation for nine passengers, but we totalled three hundred and twenty when she sailed out of Singapore harbour.

It was quite a hair-raising journey as we had to cross a live mine-field and the bouy marking the end of it was never sighted. We were packed like sardines below so I decided to lie on top of the hatch in the open with several other people. The sky was red with fire - it looked as if the whole city was burning, leaping flames lighting the blackness of the sky. From one of the nearby islands there was a huge pall of black smoke. This was where the Asiatic Petroleum Company's reserves of oil and petrol were kept and as it would have been of great value to the enemy, the British decided to destroy it.

After we got into the open sea I tried to sleep. At 3am we heard shouts for help; the ship stopped and we picked six men out of the water. I knew one of them, a young Volunteer Naval Reserve, I had played badminton with him in Penang.

During the first day at sea we were bombed by a passing plane, it was a near miss - the ship heeled over, we were all thrown off our feet - but thankfully the Mata Hari righted herself. We heard later that both ships that had been in Singapore harbour with us, the 'Kuala' and the 'Vyner Brook' had been sunk.

Because of the repeated bombing attacks, the Captain of the 'Mata Hari' decided to hug the islands by day and sail by night. Instead of going to Java we were heading for the Banka Straits. During the second night we felt that we were being followed - every now and then a green search light played on us. As dawn broke a Jap destroyer was seen quite close to us - it was the end of a night of great tension.

The 'Mata Hari's' maximum speed was thirteen knots and her sole means of defence was an obsolete gun, so the Captain had no option but to surrender to the Jap destroyer. By this time we were near to the island of Banka and slowly moving into Muntok harbour, followed closely by the destroyer. Before we dropped anchor all the charts were thrown into the sea and the Captain ordered that anyone with firearms must throw them over board. By the time our ship stopped we found ourselves surrounded by other Jap craft.

The destroyer came alongside and our Captain told the men to go below. The Jap naval officer came aboard with two sailors carrying swords. The Jap flag was run up, now we were under The Rising Sun.

PART FOUR - A NURSES WARTIME DIARY – I

February 15th - Captured by the Japanese
After the Jap officer came aboard we were told that the men were to be taken off the ship that morning and the women and children were to follow in the afternoon.

Before leaving the 'Mata Hari' we were told to bring not more than one piece of luggage ashore. I had only one suitcase, which contained a travelling rug and a few clothes; my other case had been left behind on the wharf in Singapore.

Christine Bundy had two cases and more clothes than she could carry, so gave away the rest and offered me a glamorous black satin dressing gown with long sleeves. This garment I treasured for the next three and a half years, as I slept in it and it was protection from the mosquitos.

We were taken by launch to a narrow wooden jetty, where we were kept through the long hot hours without food or water. When darkness came a cold wind blew up and we huddled close together to try and keep warm. The night seemed very long; we tried to help the wounded who were with us but there was little we could do. One very sick man was a sailor from the famous 'Prince of Wales'.

16th February

In the morning we were given a bucket of water to share between us. I had brought a small metal sugar basin with me from the ship and this served as a mug. I knotted the jewelry I had with me into a head scarf and tied it under my hair for safety; we had seen a Jap guard walking amongst people removing their rings and watches etc. It was almost midday by the time they made us walk in threes to large building next to the jail. Originally built for the coolies in the tin mines, it comprised of a number of windowless stone buildings or blocks with sleeping space consisting of raised concrete platforms sloping towards a central passageway and at the far end a small room with a tap and water tank for bathing and another room with a row of squatting type latrines. The women and children occupied the blocks on one side of the square, the servicemen and civilian men were in blocks on the other side. The centre there was a roofed over area where there were trestle tables and benches. We had had no food for over twenty-four hours and it was night before we were given some rice. More and more people kept

arriving - a large number of British and Dutch servicemen, also many Dutch and Eurasian families.

The first night we lay on the cold concrete slabs trying to sleep - the small children screamed all night and every hour a Jap guard tramped through our block and seemed to take a delight in hitting our shins with the butt of his rifle.
There were five doctors in the camp, two of them women and at this time there were six British Nursing Sisters and a few Chinese nurses. Then twenty-five Australian Army Sisters joined us. We took it in turns to help with the wounded and the guardroom was turned into a surgery. There were about five hundred people in our camp and in the jail a large number of servicemen.

21st February
A British Air Force officer had to have a foot amputated. Alice Rossie and I assisted the surgeon who had to do it in the most primitive manner. The Japs refused to let the patient go to the local hospital or to send in the right instruments, so someone made a saw out of a knife. It was just as well this poor man, Armstrong, was too ill to know what was happening. Another man had been bayonetted in the stomach when trying to get a drink of water. One day this man was lying on the floor waiting to have his dressing done when the Jap guard came in and ground his heel into the man's wound.

One night we were called up to attend to another group of people just brought in. They had been on board the 'Kuala'. The survivors had clung to the rafts and some were burnt black with the sun. One such girl was brought in, the only survivor from a raft full of people. Her eyes were sunk into the back of her head and it was some minutes before we realised she was English. This was Margot Turner, a Q.A. She had reached a small island and after three days there she was taken off by a cargo boat which was in turn sunk the same night. Four days later she was picked up by a Jap battleship and she had survived all this time by collecting rain water in the lid of her powder compact. Margot was much liked by everyone and years later became Matron-in-Chief Dame Margot Turner. The

only other Q.A. with us was an Irish girl, Mary Cooper, whose hands were badly lacerated from sliding down the ship's rope into the sea before getting into a raft.

Some people who were able to get onto rafts died of exposure and lack of drinking water, others fell off into the sea as they had not the strength to hold on. We were told that twenty-three allied ships had either been sunk or captured in that area and the survivors were brought into our camp.

28th February

I was in the surgery that afternoon when two people were brought in; one a tall Australian Army Nursing Sister called Vivian Bullwinkle, the other a British Army soldier. Both were covered with scratches and septic mosquito bites. Vivian had had a terrible experience. She had been with twenty-two other Australian sisters on rafts trying to reach the shore; they waded towards the beach and landed near the town of Muntok. The Australian sisters joined some other people on the beach including elderly civilians and servicemen, some of them wounded. They all spent the night on the beach, then the next day some of the civilians decided to walk towards Muntok to find help.

The Australian Sisters stayed with the wounded. Soon a number of Japanese soldiers appeared, they made the men walk a little distance away beyond the rocks, then proceeded to machine gun and bayonet them to death. The Japs then returned to the Australian girls and made them form up in a line and told them to walk into the sea, then proceeded to shoot them in the back. They were all killed except for Vivian who lay down pretending to be dead. After the Japs had gone she wandered through the jungle for ten days. She came across the British soldier, he was one of the men who had been bayonetted but survived; he died in the camp after a few days. They eventually reached a village where the Japs found them. Miss Jones, the senior Australian sister was told about this shooting of the twenty two Australian sisters and it was decided not to tell the other Australian sisters as it would have upset them so much to hear the fate of their friends.

Twice a day we were given a small bowl of rice and some thin vegetable soup. The first few days we also had weak tea in the early morning but afterwards we only had a cup of hat water. Once we had a small amount of stewed dried octopus with our rice, which made a change. Dysentery developed and most people had swollen ankles. There were an increasing number of flies and no disinfectant. Armstrong, the Air Force Officer, had to have his other foot amputated - he was very brave and never complained - mercifully he died a few days later. Soon after, another man died of dysentery.

At this time I got to know Mary Jenkins. She slept beside me on the concrete slab. I had not met her before. Mary had joined Auxiliary Medical Service in Singapore and she knew several of the sisters in Singapore General Hospital. Mary could have left by ship some weeks before but decided to remain with her husband and help with the wounded. On 13th February orders came through that as many Europeans as possible were to leave on all sorts of vessels and head of Batavia. Mr. Jenkins volunteered to man a small coaster. There were about twelve British men on board and Mary offered to cook for them. Two days later the little vessel was captured and the people on board joined us. Mary and I became good friends.

Amongst the last to brought into the camp was a Russians Jewish woman and her little boy, Mischa, who was three years old. This woman and her husband and child had been thrown into the sea when their ship went down. She had seen her husband drown. She developed pneumonia and died a few days later. The little boy knew no English - fortunately he was really too young to understand what had happened. Mary Jenkins took charge of Mischa.

I exchanged a blue handkerchief for two rolls of bread from an Indonesian guard - the Japs had taken on some local men to help with guard duty. Many of the male prisoners exchanged leather wallets and watches etc. for food smuggled in by the local guards.

March 1st

We became more accustomed to the meagre diet and sleeping on the 'fish slabs'. Every morning there was a great scrabble for the bathroom; the smell of the latrines was dreadful. We bathed by having 'dipper baths' - throwing tins full of water over ourselves from the water tank. At first the Jap guards used to walk in and watch us, but they soon got bored and walked out again. During the heavy rain, I stood outside and washed my hair. There were not enough drugs for the sick and wounded. I used my pot of face cream for burns on a man's buttocks.

March 2nd

The women, children and all civilian men were taken to Palembang. We six Malayan Nursing sisters remained, with some other women who volunteered to stay, to look after the sick. There were twenty-three women and five hundred men left. Another batch of two hundred and fifty prisoners were brought in, so we were just as crowded.

One day a Jap officer rode through the camp on a horse, no doubt this was done to impress us. Then the order came that half the servicemen were to be sent to Palembang.

I became very ill with fever, diarrhea and a terrible headache. This lasted for several days and left me as limp as a rag. Dr Reed gave me some quinine but said I probably had dengue fever. The number of flies increased. Then one day the Japs wanted six of the best looking women to go and serve in the officer's mess! There was great indignation about this. We were given three days' notice, but fortunately before the three days were up the order came that we were all to go to Palembang.

PART FIVE - LIFE IN THE DUTCH HOUSES

It was dark when we arrived and we found ourselves among two hundred and fifty women and children. There were many British as well as a few Chinese and Eurasians from Singapore, also the Australian Nursing sisters and Dutch women and children from Palembang, besides three German women and Georgette Gilmore, who was French.

The small bungalow where we were to live had been stripped of almost all the furniture and there was a barbed wire boundary. Mary Jenkin, Mischa and I were ordered to share a bedroom in house number 9 - the bedroom was already occupied by three Missionaries, two British Army wives and a fat Dutch woman with a large smelly dog which she refused to part with. The only furniture in the room was a cupboard, so we all slept on the floor. The others insisted on the door and windows being shut at night to keep out the mosquitos.

I became ill again, passing blood. Dr. McDowell isolated me in a garage with a German woman who had the same thing. The doctor gave me an injection of morphia which nearly killed me. Fortunately Alice Rossie looked after me. In fact Alice saved my life; she came in to see how I was and found me unconscious, she tried to rouse me and I could hear her voice as if it was a long way off - she rubbed my arms and legs - gradually my circulation started up again - it was like having terribly painful pins and needles. In a few days I returned to the house, but felt weak and giddy for some time.

Although we slept in House 9, we lived the rest of the time with the British in the garage of the house and our group was known as 'garage 9'. There were fifteen of us. Those who slept in the garage included Mrs. Brown and Shelagh, four Missionaries and Dorothy MacLeod, who was an attractive, cheerful little woman with a lovely singing voice. She knew the Browns well in Singapore and the three of them had been shipwrecked together. Mary Jenkin looked after little Mischa. She made clothes for him and a little mattress out of sacking.

The Missionaries made a fireplace out of stones and mud and we all helped with the cooking. Miss Cullen was the chief cook. The wood for the fire was often damp and we spent hours 'fire flapping' using a piece of cardboard to try and bring up a flame.

Twice a day we had to line up in the road outside our houses to be counted by the guards. This roll call was known as 'Tengko' and we had to bow to the guards as they came by. If we did not bow low enough we would get a face slap.

The ration lorry came up the hill to us in the mornings and the food was thrown on the road. People were appointed to count and divide the rations fairly, then someone from each group would go to collect their portion. This varied in quantity. Most days we had watered down rice (congee) for breakfast, then at midday and in the evening we had a small bowl of rice with a little boiled vegetable. The vegetable consisted mainly of kongong (water spinach) and various sorts of gourds and sometimes Chinese cabbage.

Some days we were given a tiny portion of meat which we made into a stew, occasionally a few duck eggs came with the rations, - not enough to go around, so we took it in turns to have them. Often the vegetable was half rotten before it was brought in to us and the rice was of poor quality, full of grit and weevils. It took us a long time to clean the rice before we could cook it, as we did not want to lose a single grain. The best rations came on the Emperor of Japan's birthday: four prawns each, one banana and a piece of pineapple! The next Jap holiday we had not rations at all!

Occasionally in that first month of Palembang we heard a few planes and bombs in the distance. We were always hoping for news and there were rumours that we would be repatriated.

As several women and children became ill, the British Sisters decided to do regular hours of duty visiting the sick. Our women doctors had a few medicines with them. The weather became very hot and dry. We started a 'sanitary squad', seeing that the drains were swept and trying to get people to bury their rubbish, as no refuse cart ever came to the camp.

One thing we were thankful for was that the Japs did not interfere with us much; we were full of hope and kept busy. Many people had swollen legs, rice tummies and mosquito bites. The children were miserable because there was not milk for them and my hair started coming out in handfuls, but apart from that I felt better. By this time practically all the women had stopped menstruating which was a blessing as no toilet facilities were provided.

Occasionally a lorry load of big logs arrived. This was rationed out and we had either to saw or chop it into small pieces of firewood for cooking. Mary Jenkin was good at chopping with a huge axe and I did a lot of sawing!

In May, a Dutch Mother Superior, with ten more children joined us. One night there was much excitement as we heard a lot of shouting among the guards and a shot was fired. Rumour had it that one of the guards had been killed but we never really knew.

The R.C. nuns held a Dutch service every Sunday and the British Missionaries held a service in our garage. Miss Dryburgh was very musical and started a choir - in fact we did a lot of singing in those early days. The following 'Captive Hymn' was sung every Sunday in garage 9 when quite a number of others joined us including Alice Rossie, Margot Turner, some of the Australian sisters and Audrey Owens and Nurse Kiong.

Father in captivity
We would lift out prayer to Thee.
Keep us ever in Thy love
Grant that daily we may prove
Those that place their trust in Thee,
More than conquerors may be.

Give us patience to endure,
Keep our hearts serene and pure,

Give us courage, charity,
Greater faith, humility,
Readiness to own Thy will,
Be we free or captive still.

For our country we would pray,
In this hour be Thou our stay,
Pride and selfishness forgive
Teach us by Thy laws to live,
By Thy grace may all men see
That true greatness came from Thee.

For our loved ones we would pray,
Be their guardian night and day,
From all dangers keep them free,
Banish all anxiety,
May they trust us to Thy care,
Know that Thou our pains dost share.

May the day of freedom dawn,
Peace and Justice be reborn.
Grant that nations loving Thee,
O'er the world may brothers be
Cleansed by suffering, know rebirth,
See Thy Kingdom come to earth.

By Margaret Dryburgh July 1942

When one of us had a birthday we had a little party. Miss Dryburgh made up poems and usually we could find a few flowers. Alice Rossie made pretty little arrangements of

leaves etc. in coconut shells. We sometimes played charades. Georgette Gilmore started a French conversation class and the Australian sisters made some playing cards; many of them seemed to play bridge all day. As we were near the equator it became dark early and as soon as the sun went down swarms of mosquitos appeared. We had no books to read so most evenings we just sat and talked. Once a week Mamie Colley held country dancing classes to which most of my friends went when they felt fit enough.

In June the rations were worse than ever; half rotten smelly cabbage was thrown in the road for us to collect and some days we only had rice, which was full of weevils. Sometimes there was no water and on these days long queues formed up at the guard room at the bottom of the hill where there was a tap.

At this time there was a lot of thieving going on at night. Indonesians from outside crept through the barbed wire and stole clothes and anything hanging on the washing line.

Some of the Eurasians and Chinese were allowed to leave camp and live in the town of Palembang. A few were sent back to Singapore including Kathleen Lim, an English girl married to a Chinese, I had known her in Penang. When the Japs invaded North Malaya her in-laws told Kathleen she must leave or else the whole family would probably be killed. So she left her two small children with them and boarded a ship for Australia, which is when she was captured. Before returning to Malaya, Kathleen promised to find out as much as she could about the British prisoners in Singapore. Months later she managed to get a list to us of people we knew, who were prisoners but alive and well.

PART SIX - MORE LIFE IN THE DUTCH HOUSES

In October the Japs said that the three lower houses were to be vacated and the fifty-seven occupants to be added to our already over-crowded little houses. This caused great consternation. Fresh barbed wire was put up to exclude the three vacated houses. The days were hot and sometimes followed by terrific storms. One rain storm was so heavy

that everywhere was flooded. A ll the roofs leaked and many people had streaming colds. Mary and I tried to sleep in the open but the mosquitos kept us awake all night.

Nora Chambers and her sister Ena were musical and helped get up a concert. This was quite a success. By now the Dutch people in house 9 had used up most of the tins of food they had brought in with them. We asked them not to throw away their used tea leaves but give them to us so we could boil them to make a brew for ourselves.

At the end of September the older boys left to join the male prisoners. Mothers with husbands in the men's camp were not unduly worried but the women who did not know anyone in the men's camp were every distressed.

At the start of December Mary and I got hold of an old mattress which we divided into two and filled rice sacks with the contents. Then Mary cleverly stitched them so that we could roll them up during the day, tied in a neat bundle. Up to then we had slept on the stone floor - it was bliss to have something soft to lie down on.

Once a week at this time we were allowed down the hill to the guard house where an Indian merchant came to sell us cheap material.

Those of us with no money sold our jewellery to buy little extras. Some of the Dutch had brought a lot of paper money into the camp so were able to buy jewellery from us. I bought some navy shorts and two red and white tea towels which I made into suntops. The Japs told us that we must wear coats as we did not look decent in suntops, but of course no coats were ever provided and soon they stopped telling us this. It was not long before they stopped the merchant coming. The Japs also had a bright idea that we were all to learn Japanese, but they never did anything about it.

Dr. McDowell was elected commandant and Mrs Hinch vice-commandant.

In preparation for Christmas Dorothy Moreton made toys out of sample cloth books from the Indian merchant. She made rag dolls and toy animals. Dorothy was a school teacher and she got other people to help her. Georgette Gilmore helped to make nursery rhymes rag books with appliquéd pictures all beautifully sewn. Joan Maddams made and drew 'snap' and 'happy families' cards. There was a combined Dutch and British party given for the children and every child was given a present.

On Christmas Eve almost all gathered on the rising ground where we used to catch a glimpse of the men's working party marching back and forth from the jail. As we saw them returning that day we sang 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. They stopped to listen and in the distance they waved to us. On Boxing Day morning they stopped at the same spot and sang the same carol to us in English and Dutch. It was wonderful to hear the men's voices singing, but we all felt very sad. On Christmas Day the food was the best we had had for many months. Each group was given a piece of beef, a few onions and a piece of gula malaca (palm sugar).

Nothing was ever wasted - egg shells were crushed and powdered - if we had fish, the bones were boiled then pounded into a rather gritty powder after being dried in the sun. We sprinkled this on our rice hoping it would provide us with some calcium. The charcoal resulting from the wood fires was also ground into powder which could be used as tooth powder or for stomach troubles.

The months went by slowly; we were always hoping for news of letters. At one time a Jap doctor visited the camp and arranged for some tinned milk to be sent in for the children and sick people were sent to the local hospital. Every morning my legs felt numb and I had a pain like dull toothache in my feet. It was difficult to walk when I first got up but later in the day it improved.

We were glad to have towgeh (bean sprouts) and bean curd sent in the rations occasionally. Then at one time we had soya beans which we cooked in numerous ways.

Sometimes we pounded the beans and mixed them with water to make a sort of milk. Soon the kind Jap doctor was prevented from visiting us again, so the rations deteriorated and no more milk was sent in for the children.

In September 1943 we were all moved into the camp where the civilian men had been; they had been sent back to Muntok. When the men heard that they were to leave, they thought that the camp was to be used by Jap troops, so they left the place as messy as possible and threw rubbish down the well. This was one of the first things that had to be cleaned out when we arrived!

Amongst articles that had been left behind was a solid wooden stool made by Mary Jenkin's husband. He had carved his name on it and she was delighted to have it.

Our conditions in the new camp were depressing with hard work, much carrying of water and digging and planting. We lived in long wooden huts with earth floors and slept on raised wooden platforms known as the bali-bali. There was a communal wash room with water tanks but often there was no water. During our first weeks there, there was plenty of water in the mornings so we all went along for dipper baths. The sight of so many naked women of all ages made one feel one never wanted to see another nude body. The women were either very thin and scraggy or else had swollen rice tummies and legs and most of them had septic sores and mosquito bites.

The Dutch lived in huts on one side of the camp and the British on the opposite. Each group selected a commandant. At this time there was Mother Superiour for the Dutch and Mrs. Hinch for the British. There was barbed wire all round the outside of the camp and as the huts faced inwards we saw nothing of the outside world.

Our little group from garage 9 kept together - Mrs.Brown and Shelagh slept on one side of me and Mary Jenkin on the other. We took it in turns to cook for the group, fifteen of us and we all had some extra chore as well. Mary was in charge of rations, the British

Sisters still helped with those who were ill in the British hut. Miss Dryburgh and Nora Chambers prepared music from memory for a four part orchestra and as there were no instruments we hummed the accompaniment and it sounded really lovely.

Almost everyone collected and wrote out recipes, hoping that one day we could make all these delicious sounding dishes. The mosquitos at night were unbearable.

Christmas day came and went without much enthusiasm; we sang carols at a service and the Dutch children did a Nativity play. We had tapioca root, vegetables and a little pork, given to us by a Chinese contractor and this was a real treat as we had had no meat since September. On Boxing day we gave a concert. We took great care of our clothes as there was no hope of getting anything new. Needles were more precious than diamonds and worn out garments were unravelled to provide thread. Trompers were the universal form of footwear. These were clogs of wooden soles with either leather or a piece of bicycle tyre as a strap to keep them on. The straps frequently broke and were a constant worry as there was a scarcity of nails, which made repairs difficult.

Up to now anyone seriously ill had been sent to the hospital in Pelambang, from now on this was stopped and a building near the guard room was used as a hospital. From March 1944 an increasing number of people became ill. Mary Anderson was one of these; I used to wash her and try to make her comfortable, she was so desperately thin that no-one would have recognised her. I had known her in Penang; she had been a large woman with a booming voice and a keen golfer. Now she was frail and pathetically grateful for anything one did for her. She died on the 4th March during a Jap holiday and her body had to remain in the camp for two days. In the tropical heat this was dreadful. We moved her body to the centre of the compound under an open shed and had an all night vigil. We took turns holding a vigil until the Japs finally came with a coffin to take her away.

The Vigil

'Tis night and in the camp's wide square

Unwonted silence fills the air
For now the central open shed
Acts as a shelter for the dead
How slowly time doth pass!
A tiny lamp with steady glow
Lightens the darkness and doth show
Where watchers solemn vigil keep
Beside the dead, while others sleep
How slowly time doth pass!
Why do you use this public place?
Within the walls is there no space?
The living scarce have room to lie
There is no spot for those who die
How slowly time doth pass!
But watchers, in this tropic clime
Death brings decay in little time
Why, therefore, do you think it meet
To use nought but a winding sheet?
How slowly time doth pass!
'Tis Sunday and authority
Its deaf to importunity
A coffin wanted, did you say
Do not disturb our holiday
How slowly time doth pass!
Is there no wish to give respect
to Death? Show sorrow for neglect?
Had healing medicines been supplied
Death's triumph might have been denied.
How slowly time doth pass!
'Tis but a prisoner of war

A woman too. Why worry more?
To drive away and rats that creep
And hungry dogs, we vigil keep
How slowly time doth pass!
A victim of accursed war
Who ne'er shall see her native shore
In open shed sleeps her last sleep
While watchers solemn vigil keep.
How slowly time doth pass!

Written by M. Dryburgh 5.3.44

From now on we became accustomed to our friends dying and it became an everyday occurrence.

PART SEVEN - NOTES FROM MY DIARY

March Rations - a small piece of soap each - the first for months! Only one green bean per head! Still no meat. Local people tore up some of our railings for firewood. The guards angry.

7th Margot caught a chicken!

9th Rations worse. Eating Kangkong (water spinach) stalks thrown out by the Dutch. Have done so for months - now even they are eating them.

13th Fainted again. Seen Dr.Goldberg. Am to have complete rest for one week.

16th Several Japs came round the camp.26 people from Block 6 to move out and make room for 20 policemen. We were all squeezed up closer than ever. We are now to be handed over to the military. Goon Sai Boon no longer our protector! All had to go

outside to be checked. I am counted amongst the sick so lay down outside. All the others had to stand in the hot sun, most were collapsing when the Japs had finished checking everyone. Hardly any wood.

23rd Another check of every individual in camp. This took two hours. Changing of the guard at 8:00. Exit of police. Just heard the latest order. Tengko (roll call) at 6:30 to be followed by grass cutting in the compound. A Jap General or Governor came round.

Jennie ill and Mary Jenkin getting swollen ankles again.

April 3rd Palm Sunday! Sacks of maize arrive. Trying to find the easiest way to cook it! Find that by pounding it into course flour is the best way, but very hard work. It is old stock and full of weevils, normally used for pigs! I am developing tummy trouble again, but have had 6 weeks respite. More trouble over people not wanting to cut grass - it has now been decided that each morning 8 people must cut grass for an hour.

5th A few toys arrive for the children - I wonder what will happen next.

6th Greatest excitement for two years! British women from Djambi arrived, including Netta Smith a nursing sister and friend of Jennie MacAlister, also Dr.Thomson and some Eurasians. There are rumours that many more internees are coming to join us.

7th Shelagh has fever again. Mary Jenkin looking very tired and I feel as weak as before my rest cure.

9th Easter Sunday. We got up a concert in spite of having little energy. The Japs gave us a tin of meat, which was shared by the eight of us. It was given as a prize for an item in the concert entitled 'A Musical Market' and I sang 'Cockles and Mussels'. Great logs of wood sent in for us to chop. Everyone is so tired. There are few axes and these are blunt and the handles are coming off.

20th Hitler's birthday. Capt Siki visited us. Beef arrived, the first meat ration since September, just enough for a tiny stew. New order - six people from each block to do four hours gardening daily. After much talk it was decided that each group could have a plot to look after. Have been out to clear ground ready for seeds.

27th I sold my gold watch - hope to get some extras to eat if possible. Latest order: have to go outside the barbed wire and into the road to cut the grass verges. Felt very weak the rest of the day. The first parang (type of sickle) I was given broke, then my tromper fell into a filthy drain. I got covered in mud getting it out. Praise be the water in the wash room was still on, so able to bathe and wash my hair and clothes. We were told that it was difficult to get coolies in Palembang, so we must now sweep the roads etc. Capt. Siki informed us that there would be no repatriation until the end of the war and that our living conditions cannot be improved.

May 3rd Mrs.Colley ill. Mrs.MacLelland died.

5th Chickens with the rations! One small chicken for 14 of us. I was the cook for our group and stewed the bird for midday and had the soup at night. After not tasting chicken for over two years a 1/14th of a small bird seemed a feast for the gods! What treats we have in store when we eventually get free! Another Jap came round and we had to stand in the blazing sun for ages and bow to him as he inspected us.

7th Fresh fish arrived - they were still alive - it is several months since we had any - these must be river or mud fish as they have long feelers on their heads.

11th Mrs. Curran Sharp died. I ate chopped banana skins for the first time, which helped to fill a corner. The fruit of the bananas were given to the sick. Every day fresh orders from the Japs about gardening and grass cutting. Am getting used to being a road coolie and now understand why they spend half their time sharpening their parangs! The last time I went out, poor Maudie Hilton cut three blades of grass and then her finger.

18th Several planes in the air and alerts sounded but still no news. Fifty more Dutch and Indonesians arrived from the camp in Djambi. We are now to have communal cooking. All our small fireplaces must be removed and the bricks used to build large fireplaces. No help was given us but some of the Dutch helped us, they worked like beavers and by the next day it was
done.

19th Another batch of people from Djambi and 43 more from T.Karang - many of them are nuns. Capt Siki gave us a talk with an interpreter about fire precautions and air raids - so we are all optimistic. Some eggs came with the rations - one for every 12 people. Getting very short of water as the well is almost dry. No rain and it is very hot. Hardly any vegetables sent in to us. A few people allowed outside the camp to go along the road with a guard in search of edible plants. Weed soup! For the first time the Japs seem really anxious about the food shortage.

June 11th A small wild boar brought into camp - the bully guard stole a leg off it, the rest made into stew and much enjoyed, although only about 1oz of meat per person. There are now 594 people in the camp. There is a flourishing 'Black Market' here, some of the local guards (known as heyhaws) chat to the Indonesians and the Dutch, for high prices they purchase goods for them. They also buy local cigarettes and sell them at a profit. Alice Rossie and some of the others long for a cigarette - am thankful I've never been keen on smoking.

14th Lucky Day! We had an egg and a piece of pineapple each!

19th Sally Oldham died - she was a middle aged missionary - very Lancashire, although she had spent years with the Chinese in Singapore she could only speak English. She was a simple soul without much education, with the result she did not get on well with the other missionaries. Very hot and no rain, the ground is as hard as stone. Every day workers are sent out with chunkels (a type of hoe) and picks. The whole padang is to

be cultivated with sweet potatoes and ubi kayu (Tapioca root) and now even the ground outside by the barbed wire is to be dug up.

24th Latest camp job, manuring the sweet potatoes with the contents of the septic tank. When the rice is brought in, all the sacks have been tampered with, someone is stealing it before they arrive here. Any report to the authorities only makes matters worse. Everyone is getting thinner and weaker, I am trying to fill up by drinking water.

July 3rd One month's sugar rations arrived 3 tablespoons. Sometimes a few eggs come but Dr. Goldberg claims most of them for the sick. One day there was a horrible stink just outside the part of the dormitory where Mary and I slept. The guard let us go by the barbed wire and as we were searching round, Fatty (the Jap officer) walked past us - he was wearing yellow silk pajamas - we did not notice him until he had gone by as we had had our backs to him. When we returned to the guard room we were shouted at and made to stand in the hot sun for an hour - because we had not bowed to Fatty!

4th Felt ill and fainted again. The Japs complain that the children pull faces and laugh at them. More threats to cut rations. Mackenzie ill with dysentery.

19th Still no rain - water ration reduced. Baby Darling died very suddenly.

27th Grace Guer died. She had only been ill four days - a great shock to us all. She was young and pretty and had kept fairly fit. A high official visited the camp so we had to do up the dormitories and sweep the road.

31st Capt Siki made a speech - the black market must stop - we continue to work hard and we must obey all orders. Squads now go out to the water hydrant 1/4 mile away and fill up tins, buckets etc. Sometimes we are allowed to use the water for cooking but often the Japs insist that we water the sweet potato plants with it. This is infuriating as this water is clean and we have to use muddy well water to cook and bathe with.

August 4th Genuine air raid in the distance. The Japs very exited. The Dutch as usual expect to leave here any day. Shelagh Brown is ill with malaria. All the missionaries ill - Mischa has diahoraea and vomiting. I was on duty so had a hectic time looking after them all.

7th Fresh fish arrived - they were still alive - it is several months since we had any - these must be river or mud fish as they have long feelers on their heads.

11th Mrs Curran Sharp died. I ate chopped banana skins for the first time, which helped to fill a corner, the fruit of the bananas goes to the sick. Every day fresh orders from the Japs about gardening and grass cutting. I am getting used to being a road coolie and now understand why they spend half their time sharpening their parangs!

18th Several planes in the air and alerts sounded, but still no news. 50 more Dutch and Indonesians arrived from a camp in Djambi. We are now to have communal coking, all our small fireplaces must be removed and large ones built from the bricks.

PART EIGHT - FURTHER NOTES FROM MY DIARY

The latest crazy order is that the rubbish heap, which contains broken plates, tins, etc., is to be scattered over the unfortunate sweet potato plants - these have already had the contents of the septic tank poured over them, as well as ash from the kitchen fires! Great indignation as Fatty (the Jap officer) insisted on the water carriers filling his bath and water tank, and then they had to water the gardens belonging to the Japs, which was a most exhausting job. Ena Murray and three others had to stand in the sun as punishment for getting water in the wrong place. One teacupful of water to wash in now - the wells have dried up and we long for rain. So often the clouds come and go away again!!

11th

At 1:00 am air activity and gun fire - we were all very cheered by this. Strict orders for no

lights and no fires allowed until daybreak. The women who were punished yesterday were made to work from 6:00 to 11:00 emptying the contents of the septic tanks onto the plants - a nauseating job.

17th

Wild Excitement! Letters from the outside world - the first time in over two and a half years of captivity! I got one from Auntie Lill dated February 1944. Mrs Brown heard that her elder daughter had had a baby and her son Alec was well although a prisoner in Germany. We were told we could each write one fifty word letter but we must not mention food or water shortage or that the Japs make us work, so it sounds as if they are ashamed of their treatment.

27th

Capt Siki gave us another talk - we must be prepared to move to Muntok at any time between now and 15 September. We are furious that he made us all work like slaves, planting vegetables etc. Obviously for their own use. We were told that we will probably go in small boats and warned to take only small parcels as the sea will be rough! Also warned that our future camp will only have oil lamps and no running water - grim thought but it cannot be worse than here.

October 1st

Still here, but told we may have to send our belongings on ahead to Muntok. A few letters arrived, they were letters from England and had been forwarded on from Singapore - many of them were two years old. It sounded as if two bombs were dropped not far off.

4th

The order came at midday that the first group were to get ready immediately as we were to leave by 2:00pm. There were about sixty of us. We hurriedly packed our few possessions and had a meal - we then had to wait two hours before the lorries came to

take us away. The rest of the camp cheered wildly as we drove away, sitting on our bundles with tin cans and other precious belongings tied to our backs. We took everything, not knowing what was in store for us. We drove down to the river and boarded the ship which was waiting for us. To my great surprise I discovered that it was one of the ferry boats which used to run between Penang and Butterworth on the mainland, more than 400 miles away. I thought of the times I had boarded the ferry boat in happier days.

The seats had been removed and we found space on the deck where we could lie down, for by now it was dark. After only a short distance we stopped near the railway station. We were astonished to find that a lot more people were to join us. They had come by rail from a camp in Bencoolen. There were over one hundred women and children, nearly all Dutch. Many looked very ill, and a number were unable to walk, including several nuns, all suffering from malaria, malnutrition and beri-beri. Our people had to help carry their baggage from the train.

Once they were all aboard the deck was crowded and I found it impossible to sleep. It was a miserable night.

5th

We sailed down river this morning, there was a beautiful dawn and the air was fresh. As we got nearer to the sea we hoped that we had said goodbye to Sumatra for ever and that freedom was getting nearer. We had each brought a bottle of boiled water and a little cold rice. How we would have enjoyed a cup of hot coffee! I took a spoonful of my precious sugar; this always did me good when I felt particularly weak and I used to keep a little store of sugar in a face cream jar for emergencies. We sailed down the river all day. It was night when we approached Muntok Island. To get ashore we had to go by coal lighter and with great difficulty we had to scramble down a very narrow iron ladder and into the depths of this filthy pitch-dark boat. The sea was quite rough and we were tossed around like corks. Some of the women screamed and became hysterical. I felt terribly

sea-sick and was trying not to faint. By the time we reached the jetty I hardly had the strength to climb up the iron rungs of the ladder. Fortunately two Japs at the top caught me just as I was about to fall backwards into the sea.

It seemed as if we trudged for miles, the Japs kept shouting at us to hurry. I was almost in tears, my legs felt like jelly. Finally we came to a lorry which was to drive us to our new camp. Mary and I were the last two to scramble in. The new camp was huge but we couldn't see much in the dark. The Japs had found it so difficult getting us ashore that they decided to leave the rest of the people aboard.

To our food had been cooked for us by the men whose camp was some distance away. As only a third of our number had arrived and they had prepared enough food for all of us, we were given really large portions. There was a huge stingray, fried fish, congee, rice and hot tea - a real feast. Some people just stuffed themselves - I felt too tired for a big meal but had some congee and tea and took some rice and fish for tomorrow.

PART 9 - SURVIVING THE INTERNMENT CAMP

Every morning I woke up early. The sun rises were beautiful and we felt hopeful that conditions were going to improve. Although we had big airy huts and we had plenty of space, we found it a long way to walk from one place to the other. For the first time Mary and I did not live in the same hut as the missionaries. They arrived a few days after us with the rest of the women and children from Palembang. From then on Mrs. Colley looked after Mischa as Mary was not well.

The first few days the nursing sisters were kept busy trying to help the new people from Bencoolen. Most of them had malaria but we had no quinine to give them. The Jap guards wanted to be friendly and they always asked us if we were married and if not, why not. A dreadful sickness known as Muntok fever spread through the camp. There was a bird which we heard at night and the local people called it the death bird. The sick were

looked after in two huts, one for the very ill and dying, known as the hospital, and the other, known as the convalescent hut, where there were also some very sick people.

I did regular hours of duty with other nursing sisters. We had to draw water from the well for all the patients. It was very tiring work and often the rope broke. The water smelt horrid but we had to use it. Occasionally we were allowed to go to a nearby stream for a bathe, but the only time I did so I became ill with fever and dysentery.

Outside the camp near where we emptied the garbage there was a cinnamon tree. We sometimes chipped off a piece of bark - this, when pounded with a stone and sprinkled on our rice, gave us a welcome change in flavour.

After a few weeks in Muntok the latrines were in a disgusting state - there was no drainage - just a large tank that rapidly filled up to almost overflowing, with huge maggots crawling about. One had to crouch on bamboo slats, a foot on each side with the foul tank below. Some of the women volunteered to clean out the tank, using buckets and emptying them outside the camp.

Ena Murray and her sister Norah Chambers and Audrey Owens were amongst these splendid people who did this filthy and nauseating task. They were given a few cents each week to buy extra food. Years later I still had nightmares of this seething mass of maggots.

There was not enough wood sent in for the cooking, so a wood squad was formed to go outside with a guard and search for logs ect. Most of the women were too weak to walk for carrying bundles of wood but the children helped to do this. It was here that the Japs said that we must dig the graves for our dead. Some of the stronger women and young boys became the regular grave diggers.

The water in the well by the hospital hut got very low and some of the other wells dried up, so there was the additional chore of fetching water from the stream. By this time we were all getting weaker and everything one did was an effort. Most people developed fever and the death rate rose rapidly. But however bad it got we never gave up hope and people were always saying 'it cannot be long now'.

Christmas 1944 came and went, very few efforts were made this time. We were mentally and physically tired. We could not sing even if we had tried, as most of us had lost our voices and were apathetic to what was going on around us - even when our friends died.

Mary Jenkin improved and came out of hospital. She was still weak when one day the ration lorry arrived. It had come from the men's camp and beside the rations came bundles belonging to the men who had died and whose wives were with us. Mary was handed a pair of boots and a small case - evidently her husband had died a few weeks earlier. Mary was very brave - quiet and unable to cry, she was determined to keep going for the sake of her son Robert, who was 21 and in England the last time she had seen him.

Mary and I were just about at the end of our tether when we heard that we were to move again to another camp. We were told we could go with the first batch if we liked, so we decided to do so, glad to get away from Muntok. I felt there was something evil about the place, even when we saw the beautiful clear sky and the dawn break with all the most lovely colours that I have ever seen, there was something sinister about it all.

We were all ready to go - then there was the usual waiting about for hours before we finally boarded a small ship. We were so crowded that we could hardly move, all packed close to one another on the open deck. Fortunately it did not rain and we remained like this all night. We sailed at dawn and sat on the hard deck in the blazing sun with aching backs. Once more across the sea and up that wretched river. Just after dark we stopped and got herded onto a train. The Japs insisted that we left our bundles and cases behind on the ship and we wondered if we should ever see our few precious belongings again.

Mary was feeling ill and could hardly stagger along; I felt shaky but managed to get her in with the hospital patients on the train. These were lying on the floor of a goods wagon. I spent the night in another crowded compartment sitting on a hard bench. There was no room to straighten one's legs, let alone lie down. We were in pitch darkness with all the windows closed. A poor girl called Gladys was at my feet. She spent the entire night moaning and clutching hold of us, saying that someone was trying to kill her. In the morning we were given a tiny loaf made of tapioca flour. It was good to have something to chew but we wished it could have been three times larger.

When it was daylight the train stopped and the guards let us get off for a few minutes and we climbed down onto the railway track where there was a water tank, but no houses or water to be seen. I was asked to go along and help with the sick in the goods wagon and was only too thankful to move away from Gladys. Mary and the other patients were in a closed truck which had previously been used for coal. It was filthy and very hot because the Japs made us keep the steel doors shut. There was a large pot of water in the truck and it slopped over and mixed with the coal dust on the floor where the patients were lying. Dr. Thomson, Miss MacKinnon and Mrs. Rover were helping to look after the sick and there was hardly room to move without treading on someone. The patients were mostly Dutch nuns suffering from fever and diarrhea and asking for bedpans all the time. These we had to empty through a small opening in the door, which had to be completely shut whenever we got near a village or a station. The smell and heat were almost beyond endurance.

A day and two nights passed in this atmosphere. The little Jap guard in charge of us did his best to give us some air, but the steel door of the truck was too heavy for us to move. Once he handed us a bunch of bananas. We only had one stop during the day when we were given a little rice. At the end of the second night we were bundled out before dawn into torrential rain. We had to carry the sick who were unable to walk and everyone got soaked to the skin. We had to lift the stretcher cases along a road and up a steep slippery bank to a warehouse. It was still dark and there were eight people to carry. We were

exhausted and shivering by the time we had finished. We remained in the warehouse for about an hour and were given a small cup of soup and some rice. It was now daylight and lorries came to take us to our destination. Once more we had to lift the stretcher cases and carry them down the slippery bank in the early morning air. Our clothes had dried on us and our legs were caked in mud, but it was a joy to know that we had left that ghastly train behind.

After a long drive we turned off the road and into a drive through a rubber estate. We stopped in a clearing near a river - the end of our journey had come. Three days and two nights without sleep - I climbed down from the truck and was about to collapse when Dr.Thomson came up to me with a drink of saki. They brought me round, so I was able to keep going a little longer.

The journey for the other two groups of people from Muntok was equally bad. Altogether seven people died during the journey, while others collapsed on arrival and never recovered.

PART 10 - FRIENDS IN THE INTERNMENT CAMP

I looked around our new camp and was not impressed. The camp was in the centre of a large rubber estate, surrounded by jungle. Three years earlier the Dutch manager had followed the scorched earth policy and destroyed the rubber factory and much else. The manager's house and a smaller one were taken over by the Japs for themselves and the Indonesian guards. There were some long wooden huts, obviously put up hurriedly just before our arrival. These huts were badly built, the roofs leaked and the floors were of mud. There were puddles of rain and grass grew inside. The British and Dutch were old to occupy these and the remaining people were put into old coolie lines; they were in need of repair but had the benefit of a cement floor.

The upper camp was divided from the lower camp by a steep bank leading down to the river. We had to cut steps in this bank as all the food had to be carried up this way and in

wet weather the path and steps were very slippery. A bridge crossed the river and led to the communal Kitchen and coolie lines and older buildings, including the 'hospital'.

I went down the hill to the hut which was to be used as a hospital. Mary and the other patients were already there lying on the damp smelling bali-bali. I remained there as I had developed fever. Two days later we heard that our belongings had arrived with the second batch of people from Muntok. My legs were shaky as I went up the hill to collect our cases, Mary and I each had one small case and then discovered that many people had had clothes and other things stolen from their bundles. My precious sewing needles had gone and other things of real value. I could have wept because I had only a few cents left and just did not know how I was going to manage. But like every other time something turned up unexpectedly. Dr. Goldberg was anxious to buy a pair of strong shoes. There was mud everywhere and she only had light sandals. Dr. Goldberg never wore trompers like the rest of us, she was always well dressed and seemed to have plenty of money. Just before I left Muntok Iris Frith had given me a good pair of shoes which were too small for her. These I still had so I offered them to Dr. Goldberg, hoping she would give me a good price - but being who she was she only gave me F.10. Later I sold my last piece of jewellery - Mother's gold bracelet - I got F.100 for it, later I heard that I should have had five times as much - but not being in with the black market people I had to get someone to sell it for me and she got a good 'rake-off'.

Although Dr. MacDowell had suggested I was to have a month's rest, I found myself back at work within a week – in fact Dr. MacD was quite sharp with me when I told her I still felt weak! So I continued working in the 'hospital'. There were very few medicines for the sick, but we could at least wash the patients and try to make them comfortable. One of the first jobs we did was to get hold of logs of wood to try to make a dry passageway down the centre of the hut, which was especially necessary at the entrance, where it was ankle deep in mud.

I went to live in a little hut near the hospital across the river. The Australian sisters lived in a similar wooden hut on the opposite bank and the Dutch hospital nuns lived in a small wooden bungalow next to them. The three doctors had another small hut further away on the edge of the jungle by the barbed wire fence. They lived in fear of tigers and other wild animals. Actually there were a number of wild pigs and deer in the nearby jungle and they came down to the river at night and we certainly heard all sorts of queer noises.

The hospital hut never got any sunshine as it was in a hollow and trees grew all round it - the worst possible building for the sick. It was an old wooden building with a mud floor left from pre-war days. The wood was rotten and the roof leaked. There was a small building next to the long hut which was used for the most serious cases. These had the advantage of a cement floor. Both buildings were rat infested. The rats squeaked and ran about all night.

When we had been in Leoboelinggau about a week Mary improved and was sent to live in a large British hut up the hill. She was unhappy about this, but Dr. Goldberg decided that Mary was not well enough to do hospital work. I used to go up every day and was glad to find her getting stronger. Most of the British sisters lived up in the main camp. Gilly had broken her leg on the journey so was unable to move. Alice Rossie, Netta Smith, Jenny and Margot had had a row over the running of the hospital before we left Muntok and they did not want to move down. Mary Cooper was too ill to do any work and MacCullum had all her time taken up helping Mrs. Hinch, our commandant. When we had been there only a short time they all got fever one after another, so that put an end to them coming to live in the little hut down by the river.

Although it was officially the British sister's house we called it International Cottage. Our little group who lived there was a very mixed collection of nationalities and characters. The best place in the hut was bagged by Mrs. Rover - a German married to a Dutchman who was somewhere in Java. In the early days in Palembang she was allowed comparative freedom and got the job of running the household for the Jap so-called

Governor and his staff she was a good cook and very fond of her food. She evidently got on quite well with the Japs for when she was sent in to join us eighteen months after we had been captured she arrived looking as fit and fat as if she had been through no hardships. She also arrived with stacks of luggage - a whole collection of sauce pans and cooking utensils, a dog and even some of her husband's clothes. Fortunately the dog had been given to a Jap before we got to Loebeolinggau. Most of us hardly knew Mrs Rover as in the previous camp she had lived with the Dutch. She was about forty and a trained nurse before her marriage. She decided she would like to join the hospital staff when we moved from Muntok. She had a deep voice and her English was funny at times. She liked being the grand lady and as she had a much bigger mattress than anyone else she consequently took up more room. She hated getting up early in the morning, but never minded doing a late duty in the hospital at night. She loved her coffee and her cigarette and always had plenty of both as she was well in with the black market people. Although Mrs. Rover was entirely selfish she was kind and generous in many ways and lent her cooking pots, zinc bath and many other useful possessions. I don' know how we would have managed without them, for our rusty tins were developing leaks and the little frying pan had two large holes in it. Mrs Rover was very friendly with Dr. Goldberg and got many privileges - some of which we were able to share. She always managed to get quinine or atebrin when she had attacks of fever which she certainly made the best of.

Georgette Gilmour took the place next to Mrs. R. She was French and married to an Australian who was a prisoner in Singapore. She was a sweet thing with plenty of common sense and most capable in every way - and with a sense of humour to go with it! Mrs. R. used to get on her nerves and it is no wonder that being French she had no time for a German woman, as when Georgette was a young girl she had been through a very hard time in Lille all through World War 1. Georgette used to get severe attacks of malaria and she generally became delirious and talked all sorts of rubbish - sometimes in English but generally in French or Malay. She must have been very attractive when younger - she had pretty wavy hair and big blue eyes and a slight French accent which was charming - she had become very pale and tired looking but always did her best.

Maimie Macintosh came next to Georgette - she was a little woman with a round face - always talking about the Highlands or her Grannie (although she must have been one of the eldest in our hut.) She was very nervous and easily upset over things and she used to worry about her health a lot - at one time she used to tremble all over and became too frightened to go across the bridge by herself. Geogette used to try and calm her - she felt responsible for her as she had known both Maimie and her husband in Malaya. Maimie struck me as being the type whose husband had always been the boss - she seemed unable to make decisions for herself and she got flustered very easily - although she liked telling people what to do! She and Helen had many arguments. Helen could not stand her. She became desperately ill and nearly died, but although she recovered she looked very anaemic and had to be treated almost like a child.

L:ater when she joined us Mary slept next to Maimie and then I was next to her. Helen MacKenzie was on my left. Helen had only been in Malaya a short time as a nursing sister in K.L. when the Japs came - she spoke with a broad Glasgow accent which many people found hard to understand. In ordinary times she was a really big girl but by this time she was very thin and boney - she seemed so clumsy and was always falling over things - this was partly due to drop foot as she had beri-beri and found it difficult to lift her feet. Helen used to get wildly excited about the least thing and was always going off the deep end about someone, but one could not help liking her. She used to get dreadful attacks of vomiting whenever she had fever but as soon as she got over the worst of it she would be up and about again - she used to get very depressed when she realised that she did not have the strength she used to have.

Kong Kum Kiew was a straits born Chinese girl. She had been a staff nurse for some years in Malaya. She was short with funny little sparrow legs and a broad smiling face unless she was in one of her moods. She would do anything in the world for people she liked - in fact she was almost too generous. She loved people to make a fuss of her and joke with her - but if she thought they were trying to boss her or take advantage of her she would sulk for hours. She was always having trouble with Mrs. R. who tried to treat

her like a servant. Neither could she get on with Maimie, who did not realise that her mentality was different from ours. Fortunately, I understood her as she was so like many of the Chinese nurses in Malaya. I used to enjoy hearing her talk about her family and about the gold mine and shop they owned in Kuala Lipis. She knew quite a number of Chinese legends. Kong always kept herself very clean and tidy. Her favourite garment was a man's waistcoat which she always wore if it were at all cold or damp. On special occasions she used to put on a spotless baju, also lipstick and a string of really good jade beads. She used to make a little fire at the back of the house then after mush pounding, frying and flapping of the fire she would produce a little fried cake or hot sambal and insist on giving us a taste. She got fever quite often but when she was well she loved entertaining - she was very friendly with Dr MacDowell and Audrey Owen and had quite a number of friends among the Dutch.

Mrs MacKinnon had been assistant Matron of Penang Hospital - she came from Edinburgh, but her mother was pure Icelandic. She was tall and thin with long black untidy hair - she definitely was the wrong type to wear shorts and sun tops, but she always did so. Mac nearly always had a cigarette drooping out of her mouth made out of any vile tobacco she could get hold of and rolled in any old scrap of paper - but sometimes she got hold of native straws which I think smelt worse. She used to love getting up before daylight to light the fire making no end of noise waking everyone up. She was one of those people who whenever they are not well refuse to say anything about it until just on the verge of collapse and then become a very difficult patient. After a few weeks we were able to quell Mac's ardour as we were very short of wood and none of us had the strength to chop more than was absolutely necessary. She used to eat all sorts of rubbish including snails out of the river and in the end she developed typhoid and very nearly died. Her heart had been in a bad state for a long time so it was amazing that she pulled through. Poor Mac was very kind and sincerely religious but she certainly was a trial to live with, with all her eccentric ways.

Ours was a small one-roomed house of wood with a corrugated iron roof. This projected in front and made a tiny open veranda. Fortunately the roof only leaked badly in one place - this happened to be over my bed space at my feet - when it rained I used to curl up in a ball, so avoided the constant drip, drip! My mosquito net used to get soaked at the foot. If it rained heavily we placed a bucket to catch drips. I always meant to climb up onto the roof but somehow never got there. The noise during heavy rain was terrific - being a tin roof every little twig that fell from the trees sounded like a large branch. The little house was surrounded by rubber trees - one could hardly see the sky, the green foliage was so thick- and when the rubber nuts fell on the roof they sounded as loud as a pistol shot. There was one huge dead tree just outside and during heavy storms huge branches used to crash down. We used to dash out in the morning for the firewood and wondered what would happen to us if the whole thing came down.

The bali-bali took up most of the space inside the hut; it was made of bamboo and smelt musty. The floor was of cement so was the tiny veranda outside, so really it was a better built place than we had been in for a long time. It obviously had belonged to one of the native workers in the estate, slightly higher up than the ordinary coolie. At one end of the veranda we had a great time building a fireplace of stones, pieces of corrugated iron and odd bricks. The first few days we roamed around the camp keeping our eyes open for any treasures that might come in useful for our little house. Pieces of rusty wire, planks of wood, metal, rubber, cups etc - all sorts of bits and pieces that were left when the Dutch smashed up their machinery before the Japs arrived. Our greatest find was a large wooden table which was partly submerged in the river and caught up by a fallen tree trunk so that it was wedged into the bank. Georgette was the pioneer in getting hold of this valuable possession - she waded thigh deep and after much pushing and struggling she freed the table and turned it on its end so that Kong and I could pull it up the bank. The table must have been in the water for months as it was very slippery we stood it against the outside wall by the fireplace. We made ourselves little stools to sit on; I'm definitely not a carpenter but made myself a little seat. Mary was really clever at anything that required hammer and nails. She used to spend hours hammering pieces of tin; she

made lids that fitted, kitchen utensils and all sorts of useful things. I was better at lighting a fire, often with damp twigs and a little latex from our nearest tree. The latex was most useful, we used it for mending holes in tins and for sticking pieces of rag to the bottom of leaking buckets.

After a few weeks Mary felt much stronger and was keen to do some camp work again - and after getting the doctor's permission, she came to live with us to help run the 'home'. We needed someone to fetch our rations, boil our drinking water and go up to the 'shop' when anything came into the camp. The 'shop' was run by the rations officers and once or twice a week the Japs would send in a few things which could be sold to us: bananas, limes, chilies, root ginger and occasionally sago flour or salt fish. These had to be divided into equal portions and we had to go up the hill to fetch them. Sometimes palm oil or tapioca root would come into camp. There was the everlasting cry for containers to put these things into - then someone would have to climb the hill again with the money. We nearly always bought everything that came, then if we were hard up we could re-sell our portions at a profit and were able to make a few cents. Chili we could nearly always sell at double the price and the same with the small onions which were a ridiculous price. Our food was much the same as at every other camp, at one time the rice ration was larger, but after a while it was not nearly sufficient. We sometimes got carrots which were a welcome change, but there was never enough of anything. The only thing that we got more of was palm oil or coffee. The palm oil agreed with most of us, I used to eat it raw. We also used to fry our rice in it. We were given palm oil for our lamps which we made out of tins and a bit of rag for a wick. We ate most of the lamp oil and only had a light if absolutely necessary.

Although we had to buy the coffee it was really good quality - very coarse and grown locally. I don't know how I would have got through without it - I started the day with my large mug full of strong coffee and generally had it twice again during the day. Many times when I was on the verge of fainting, a cup of coffee and a spoonful of sugar would bring me round - Mary generally came to my rescue - and after lying down for half an

hour I would be able to get up and start work again. Occasionally we had a small portion of wild pig and once or twice the Japs sent in a piece of wild deer. Once they sent us a black bear - this meat was good but we had such a small portion that it made us hungry for more. Once we had monkey, the grey long-haired variety and although we only had about a desert spoonful of stew each, it tasted very strong. Once we had some stew sent to us that the kitchen staff said was jungle meat - none of us knew what meat it was, it did not taste as strong as the monkey - later we discovered it was panther!

After two weeks the river rose so high that it flooded the bridge and we were marooned, we could not go to fetch our rations from the kitchen or to reach the hospital to go on duty. Fortunately we each had a small portion of uncooked rice as an emergency ration, so we were able to boil ourselves a pot of rice and wait for the water to subside. Normally the river was not deep - it ran over big rocks and stones and one could wade to the other bank quite easily.

In early days we used to plunge into the river for our daily bath - the guards strolled about but it did not worry them or us - it was such a welcome change to be immersed - I used to hang on to a large stone and let the water rush over me. Unfortunately, our joy was short lived for the river became shallower and dirtier; the Japs lived up river above our camp - their latrines were boxes hanging over the river and the rest of the latrines were opposite us on the other bank. For our own cooking etc we filled up buckets and the zinc bath from the river as early as possible in the morning and some weeks later when the river got very low we carried pails of water from a well near the community kitchen - it was rather a strain and not easy as our little bridge was slippery but at any rate the water was cleaner.

PART 11 - LIBERATION AT LAST

In normal times the estate must have been a rather lovely place - ferns large and small grew all along the river banks and at the foot of many trees - some were pink tipped almost a coral colour - others were blue and green like shot silk. I had never seen blue

ferns before. I used to like arranging them in half coconut shells - but latterly I picked them for funerals - and I shall always connect ferns with dear friends who have gone. The coffins were very rough boxes made of boards that did not even join together properly - we used to cover the coffin tops with ferns to make them look more decent and fill in the gaps.

Down in our part of the camp there was not enough sunlight for many flowers to grow - the only flowers that grew in profusion were some pale mauve wild sweet peas - these were very pretty. Mrs Rover told us they were good to eat so we tried them fried and in a sauce made of sago flour and water. We called them mock mushrooms but actually they did not taste of anything. we ate the young fern tops as if they were asparagus! We tried various other weeds - some were quite palatable and helped to fill us up - we used to make soup every morning, we took it in turns and produced all sorts of concoctions - fortunately someone generally had pepper or chilies or ginger to help give it some flavour.

I have never seen such beautiful butterflies or so many varieties - some were very large - others tiny. Some looked like autumn leaves falling - others were blue -black with orange velvet bodies. The most common were deep blue and purple - there was one variety , pale green and black which was very pretty. A large number of dragon flies could be seen down by the river - these were very varied - scarlet, red, yellow and blue. There were very few birds but every morning as soon as it was light a number of crows used to make a tremendous noise up in the trees.

Our little household got on surprisingly well - although of course there were a few differences now and then. We all worked in the hospital except Mary, who coped with the rations etc. Actually we all helped her as she was not fit to go up and down to the top camp and back more than once a day. She really had not very much to do and for a few weeks she seemed surprisingly fit and well again and much more like her old self. All of us got fever now and again - nearly always there was one or other of us 'off sick'.

After about two months Mamie was very ill - it was impossible for Georgette to carry on the hospital cooking alone so two Dutch women took it over. The room where the hospital cooking was done led into another small room where the dead were laid on the floor until taken away. Georgette said that she got quite accustomed to seeing corpses as she went about her work, in normal life she would have been the last person to say that. Fortunately towards the end, our senses became dulled due to malnutrition, we did not become callous, it was just a matter of existing from day to day. Georgette did regular hours in the hospital like the rest of us and was a great help.

At the end of June Mary became very quiet and depressed - obviously she was not well - she had slight fever at times, puffy legs and seemed unable to pull herself together. She used to lie quietly for hours - I tried to help her by arranging a bed for her outside the hut in the mornings where a little sunshine came through the trees. Dr. Goldberg had very little patience with her and after a few weeks I was glad to get Mary into the hospital where at least she would get the benefit of any extra food which might be sent in.

During June and July more and more people came into hospital in such a state that we knew they would never get any better. Fever, beri-beri, all forms of malnutrition - marasma and dysentery. Miss Dryburgh, Nan Wier, Miss Livingstone, Mary Cooper - MacFie - all real friends dying one after another - several Dutch nuns and Australian sisters died - always one or two deaths every day. The grave diggers found it difficult to dig deep enough, it took so much strength, in the end the children were the strongest and it was they who did the digging. We used to carry the coffins from the hospital up the hill behind amongst the rubber trees to the clearing that was used as a burial place. A few friends used to follow and either Rev. Mother or Miss Cullen took the short service.

After two weeks in hospital Mary seemed to get a little brighter, she was able to sit up in a chair outside for a short time each day but she was still very weak. She was able to buy a few small potatoes - I used to boil them for her and she used to nibble them with a little palm oil. Sometimes I was able to coax her to take a little soup - once or twice a chicken

was sent to the hospital - patients were able to buy small portions of it, one chicken between thirty people did not go far. I said to Mary that she ought to try and take anything with nourishment in it - as long as either of us had any money we would buy what we could. But her mouth was very sore and in the end she could not swallow anything. From August 10th, the last week of her life, I realised that she could not live much longer, in fact her emaciated body was in such a state we hoped it would not be long. Helen MacKenzie was very good and helped me every morning to bathe her and make her as comfortable as possible at night. I used to go over and tuck her up and arrange the mosquito net around her. At this stage we were all so weak that we could not do as much as we wanted to for one another. On August 16 Mary was much worse. She dozed most of the day, she had very little pain and at about 7 p.m. the last thing she said was "I can't do anymore - I'm going to join Charlie".

I spoke to her and said I would see Robert, her son, when I got home to give him her love and to say how brave she had been - she gave a little smile - then soon after became unconscious and died within an hour. By now only five remained of the original fifteen from 'Garage 9'.

August 24th 1945
All those who could walk were told to gather at the top of the camp. Theer we found the Jap captain standing on a table. He announced that the war was over, but we would have to wait for arrangements to be made before we could leave - we must be patient and conditions would be improved etc..!

I think most of us were so stunned we would not let ourselves believe it at first - we had heard so many rumours before. Later we found out that the war had been over since August 15th. The next day we were all given anti-cholera injections! Rations increased and included things that we had not seen for years - Milo, Klim milk and tinned butter - even lipsticks! The Japs obviously wanted us to look in better shape by the time we were

freed. One day an Allied plane flew low over the camp - it dropped bread and S.E.A.C. newspapers by parachute - the first bread we had tasted for three and a half years.

Unfortunately the extra rations arrived too late to save a number of people. Molly Watts-Carter was among those who were dying but she was fully conscious and calmly whispered to me that she was happy to have lived long enough to know that soon we would all be free.

A few days later an Allied Officer - a South African - came round the camp, he had flown to Lahat the nearest airfield to Loeboelinggau. He said that at first nobody knew where to find us as we had been moved so often and our present camp was in a very isolated place, with the result that we were among the last people to be freed.

September 16th
We left Belaloo Estate at dawn, I wore a Jap private's uniform complete with yellow leather boots and carried a small pack containing the linen dress left to me by Mary Anderson when she died. I also had a pair of tennis shoes with the toes cut out which had belonged to Mary Jenkin. We drove in open trucks to a railway station and got on board a train waiting to take us to Lahat. Such a comfortable journey compared with the dreadful experience we had had the previous April. On our way we stopped at a small station - I saw a man on the platform with a tray of sticky sweet caked. I quickly took off my boots and handed them through the window and he gave me the lot! We spent one night at Lahat in a school where British and American soldiers looked after us.

The next day we were flown out in batches to Singapore. I had changed into my dress and climbed with trembling legs into the plane and felt I was living in a dream. We arrived in Singapore on the afternoon of September 17th and my little group was taken by ambulance to Alexandria Hospital.

It was wonderful to be in a real bed between white sheets. The Sister came over to seee me the next morning and I felt so ashamed as I saw her staring with horror - a bed bug had crawled out of my little bag and was walking across the snow white sheet! We had tried so hard to keep ourselves free of vermin. I weighed six stone and had scabies on my hands but was thankful not to have swollen legs and a rice tummy like so many others. The hospital staff looked funny to us they all seemed to have such large busts and behinds, until I realised that we had gotten so used to seeing emaciated people. For the first time for many weeks I slept all night, in spite of having had fried fish, sherry and port!

September 19th
Bacon and egg for breakfast! Ice cream later on!
We were not entirely happy and had our sad and anxious moments. We tried to trace friends and relatives and the Red Cross did their best to help us and we learnt that many of our dear friends were dead or missing. Several husbands from POW camps came looking for their wives. We had to tell them that they had died and others had been drowned when leaving Singapore three and a half years before. I hoped to get news of Tony and later made enquiries at an office which had been set up to trace people, it was here that I was told that Tony had never been a POW in Singapore and that he was listed as missing presumed dead. He must have been one of the many who perished at sea in February 1942, it was a bitter blow.

Nurse Kong said that if she got out of the camp alive she would become a Christian, this she did and her little home near Kuala Lumpar is called St. Matthews Cottage. She often entertains poor children and gives a big party every Christmas. I still hear from her every year.

After ten days in hospital I moved to Raffles Hotel which was being used as a clearing centre. One day Lord and Lady Mountbatten came round and talked to us. Ships were

leaving for the UK with British ex-POWs - Australians and New Zealanders were taken home by air!

Mrs Colley and Miss Cullen looked after Mischa on the voyage to England. While waiting for the ship, little Mischa was taken for a drive round Singapore, he could not remember any life other than being in prison camps, so during the drive he kept saying "When are we going to reach the barbed wire?" Miss Cullen wanted to adopt him and as she was about to get married she would have given Mischa a good home. However the Jewish Society said they would trace his family which they eventually did and he was sent all the way to Shanghai to live with relatives whom he had never seen.

My brother Tom got a message through to me via the Red Cross asking me to go to them in New Zealand. On the 30th September I boarded the plane with about fifteen cheerful New Zealanders, all ex-POWs - there were three other women - Joan Powell was the only one who had been with me in Sumatra. We spent one night on a small island at an Army camp. Several of us had a swim in the sea - it was a marvellous feeling. We spent one night in Darwin and another in Brisbane - everyone was most kind. From Brisbane we flew to Auckland - this was a long hop in those days. Before we got off the plane we were all well and truly sprayed with disinfectant! We disembarked and then were see by a doctor - finally we were allowed to join our friends and relatives. Dear Tom and Mabel had been waiting a long time.

I do not remember anything about the first evening with them. I only know that they were most understanding and that it was wonderful to be free and in a real home once more.

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Mrs. Phyllis. M. Thom (nee Briggs) Obituary of Phyllis Thom Nurse [Phyllis Briggs] who produced a harrowing account of her time in a Japanese prisoner of war camp after the fall of Singapore.

Anonymous. The Daily Telegraph [London (UK)] 24 Sep 2008.

PHYLLIS THOM, who died on September 6 aged 100, was a nursing sister caught up in the Japanese invasion of Malaya in December 1941; the diary she kept of her three-and-a-half year internment, now in the Imperial War Museum, is all the more harrowing because of its abbreviated nature.

At the beginning of December 1941, Phyllis Briggs, as she then was, was one of four nursing sisters at the General Hospital in Alor Star, North Malaya. On December 8 her life of parties, dances and boat trips was rudely shattered by the arrival of Japanese bombers, followed soon after by troops crossing the Malayan border. All the European women were evacuated, except for the hospital staff, who remained another four days to discharge the patients. On December 12, the nursing sisters were given the password "Curtain fallen" and joined the convoy south, travelling along roads jammed with refugees and dotted with burnt-out cars and rickshaws. In January, Phyllis Briggs was evacuated to Singapore and assigned to a maternity hospital now used for air raid victims. The sight of a Chinese woman with half her face blown away and maggots crawling out of what was left of her nose was one she never forgot.

On Friday February 13 1942, as the Japanese bombardment intensified, she boarded the Mata Hari, a cargo ship with accommodation for nine passengers which sailed out of Singapore harbour with 320 aboard. There followed a hair-raising voyage, during which the ship had to dodge attacks by Japanese bombers. Two vessels that had been in Singapore harbour at the same time, the Kuala and the Vyner Brooke, were sunk. But as dawn broke on the third day, the Mata Hari was spotted by a Japanese destroyer and there was no option but to surrender.

Put ashore on the island of Banka and separated from their menfolk, the women and children were detained overnight on a jetty without food or water, huddling together to keep warm. As Japanese soldiers wrenched off rings, watches and other valuables,

Phyllis Briggs knotted the jewellery she had into a head scarf and tied it under her hair for safety. It was to prove invaluable later as a means of bartering for food and medicines.

The following day they were transferred to a makeshift camp at Muntok, originally built for coolies in the tin mines, comprising a number of windowless stone buildings with sleeping accommodation consisting of raised concrete platforms, and rudimentary sanitation. There they were joined by the survivors of other captures and sinkings, including Vivian Bullwinkel, the only survivor of a group of 22 Australian nurses who had waded ashore to the island after the sinking of the Vyner Brooke, and were massacred by Japanese soldiers.

Over the next three and a half years Phyllis Briggs was moved from camp to camp, enduring hunger, illness, the loss of friends, and arbitrary cruelties meted out by Japanese guards. At Palembang, Sumatra, she became seriously ill, passing blood, and nearly died. Yet twice a day she had to line up for a roll call, a ritual known as "Tengko" (the answer required from prisoners): "We had to bow to the guards as they came by. If we did not bow low enough we would get a face slap". Ration lorries came up the hill every day and the food, often rotten and full of weevils, was thrown on the road. "The best rations came on the Emperor of Japan's birthday: four prawns each, one banana and a piece of pineapple!"

Phyllis Briggs did what she could to help the sick and dying. To keep her spirits up she joined a choir and sang hymns, a favourite being The Captive's Hymn, written by her fellow internee, Margaret Dryburgh: "Father in captivity/ We would lift our prayer to Thee./Keep us ever in Thy love/ Grant that daily we may prove/ Those that place their trust in Thee,/ More than conquerors may be."

Margaret Dryburgh died on April 21 1945 aged 54. The story of the choir inspired the film Paradise Road (1997), with Pauline Collins as Margaret Dryburgh.

By 1944 death had become an everyday occurrence, and entries from Phyllis Briggs's diaries of the time convey the mixture of tragedy and black comedy that were characteristic of camp life. "May 3 1944: Mrs Colley ill. Mrs MacLelland died. May 11: Mrs Curran Sharp died. I ate chopped banana skins for the first time, which helped to fill a corner. Every day fresh orders from the Japs about gardening and grass cutting. July 4: Felt ill and fainted again. The Japs complain that the children pull faces and laugh at them. More threats to cut rations. Mackenzie ill with dysentery. July 19: Still no rain - water ration reduced. Baby Darling died very suddenly. July 27: Grace Guer died. She had only been ill four days - a great shock to us all. She was young and pretty and had kept fairly fit. A high official visited the camp so we had to do up the dormitories and sweep the road. July 31: Capt Siki made a speech - the black market must stop - we continue to work hard and we must obey all orders."

At one stage there were so many dying that the grave diggers could not keep up: "In the end the children were the strongest and it was they who did the digging." Phyllis Briggs was perhaps most affected by the death of her friend Mary Jenkin, whose husband Charlie had died in a men's camp, but who was determined to keep going for the sake of her son in England. On August 16 1945, a day after Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allies, Mary Jenkin succumbed: "At about 7pm the last thing she said was "I can't do any more - I'm going to join Charlie," Phyllis Briggs recalled. "I spoke to her and said I would see Robert, her son, when I got home to give him her love and to say how brave she had been - she gave a little smile - then soon after became unconscious and died within an hour."

It was not until August 24 that the Japanese camp commander told the survivors that their captivity was over. But Phyllis Briggs's ordeal was not. Evacuated to hospital in Singapore, weighing six stone, she shared the task of telling husbands from PoW camps looking for their wives that they had died. Later she discovered that Tony Cochrane, a young sailor to whom she had become engaged in 1941, was missing, presumed dead.

Phyllis Mary Erskin Briggs was born in Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex, on June 14 1908 and spent her childhood in Paris, where her father was chaplain of Christ Church in Neuilly-sur-Seine and of the British hospital in Paris. Both her parents died while she was still in her teens and she was brought up by an aunt and uncle in northern England. She trained as a nurse in Manchester and at King's College London.

After the war she returned to nursing in Malaya in June 1946 and in 1947 was married to Robbie Thom, who became head of the Malayan Police Special Branch and a security officer in British Guyana before independence. After his death in 1967, she settled in Bournemouth, where she worked as a volunteer for Barnardo's.

She is survived by two daughters.