

HAD SURVIVED WHEN SHIP WAS SUNK

The massacred nurses were amongst those who got ashore when the steamer Vynar Brooke, racing away from Singapore, was bombed and sunk by Japanese planes in Banka Strait.

Eight of the nurses died within the past few months, mainly from malignant malaria and debility, the last one on the day the Japanese sued for peace.

The nurses all left Singapore on board the steamer Vynar Brooke on February 12, having stayed until ordered to leave by the doctor in charge.

On the morning of February 14 the ship was approaching Banka Straits between Sumatra and Banka Island when Japanese planes strafed bombed and sank it in 15 minutes, one bomb going down the funnel.

The passengers had only sticks to which to cling.

The nurses were in the water for 16 hours. They were washed back and forth by the tide, and finally were washed ashore on Banka Island, suffering exposure and chafed by the rough lifebelts.

The Vynar Brooke's passengers were widely scattered during the night and parties landed at various places along the beach.

To this fact most of the party, which returned last night owe their lives.

Once ashore they struggled along the road to Muntok and walked into the Customs House, thinking they had found safety, only to be promptly captured by the Japanese.

The remainder of the nurses, numbering approximately half the party, landed farther up the beach and met a terrible fate.

They were about to turn inland when a Japanese patrol, which previously passed without taking notice of the shipwrecked people, returned, separated the Service personnel, made them bandage their eyes, and tommy-gunned them all except Ernest Lloyd, stoker, from the Prince of Wales, who rushed into the sea and escaped, though wounded.

Lloyd, who afterwards was recaptured, in the meantime revisited the scene and found the bayoneted bodies of his comrades and some of the nurses—

rades and some of the nurses—some in the sea and some out.

These facts were later retold by Lloyd and included in the official report.

The report says that after the killing of Lloyd's companions the Japanese patrol returned from Round Cape, where they had taken the servicemen, wiping their bayonets.

They then lined up the remainder, facing the sea, and motioned them towards the water. A soldier with a tommy-gun ruthlessly shot down nurses, civilians, and merchant sailors. The Japanese then bayoneted those about whose fate they were uncertain.

One of the nurses and one sailor tried to escape, but they were caught and killed.

It was here that Sister Bullwinkel had an escape that matched Lloyd's.

She was shot through the body and fell into the water.

Thanks to a strong constitution she survived, and helped by Sumatran natives she retained her freedom for several weeks. Finally she was captured and gathered into the labor assembly station.

35 Shot, Bayoneted or Drowned

As far as it has been possible to piece together the facts, it seems that between 30 and 35 nurses were either shot, bayoneted or drowned.

Once gathered into the Japanese net the nurses found that they were with Navy, Army and Air Force men who were survivors of the bloody naval action and whose wounds they tended.

In the camp at Muntok the conditions were not too bad, but food soon became a problem.

Without resources and with only the clothes they stood up in, the nurses worked for well-to-do women among the internees and earned enough to buy necessities.

All this time the Japanese would not recognise the status of the nurses as Service personnel and kept them in an internment camp.

In September, 1943, they were moved to the men's camp, where conditions were much worse than previously.

Twenty-five women were crowded into small four-roomed bungalows without regard to race, without firewood and with no furniture and very little water.

The Japanese stole their watches and any valuables they had. The nurses managed to preserve their grey working uniforms, which they are wearing today for their homecoming. They eked out their clothing with stolen or borrowed naval blouses and shirts.

In the men's camp they earned frequent slappings and sometimes were stood out in the sun because the Japanese said they were slow in responding "tenko" at the twice daily muster parade.

The nurses had to cut and fetch wood, work in the fields and plant potatoes.

All the prisoners, women as well as men, had to bury their own dead. From time to time they moved back and forth between Muntok and Palembang, returning finally to Palembang in April of this year. Then they were taken to Loeboek Linggam, the biggest rubber estate in

the biggest rubber estate in Sumatra 100 miles from Lahat, from which they were finally rescued.

An American civilian, E. H. German, escaped the bullets in the Banka Island massacre but was bayoneted through the chest. He survived and a week later was also shepherded into a prisoners' compound.