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Sisters Behind the Wire: Reappraising Australian Military Nursing and Internment in the Pacific during World War II

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During the Second World War, approximately 3,500 Australian military nurses served in combat regions throughout the world. The vast majority were enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), but after the Japanese advance and the fall of Hong Kong (December 1941) and Singapore (February 1942), a significant number of these nurses spent three-and-a-half years as POWs in Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan and the Philippines.¹ To date, considerable research has been undertaken on POW experiences in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand and Japan, albeit primarily focused on the testimonies of men and civilian women.² This body of research utilises various methodologies, from Yuki Tanaka and Kei Ushimura's efforts to reconcile Japanese war crimes with the corruption of the *Bushido* ethic and sexual violence in contemporary Japanese society, to Christina Twomey's work on the imprisonment and repatriation of Dutch, Dutch–Eurasian and Australian civilian women and children. In the past fifteen years, historians have become aware of the need to recognise the multiplicity of these experiences, rather than continuing to focus on individual community, camp or regional case studies.³ Nurses are by no means absent from the discussion, although the majority of notable works on this subject focus on Hong Kong or the

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¹ See Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ian W. Shaw, *On Radji Beach* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2010); Nicola Tyrer, *Sisters in Arms: British Nurses Tell their Story* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2008); Catherine Kenney, *Captives: Australian Army Nurses in Japanese Prison Camps* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1986); Lavinia Warner and John Sandilands, *Women Beyond the Wire* (London: Arrow Books, 1997). Memoirs

written by interned nurses include Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1954) and Jessie Elizabeth Simons, *White History Passed* (London: William Heinemann, 1954).

² For example, Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack (eds), *Forgotten Captives in Japanese Occupied Asia* (London: Routledge, 2008); Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: W. Morton, 1994); Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (eds), *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

³ Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, 'Japanese Occupied Asia from 1941–1945: One Occupier, Many Captives and Memories', in Blackburn and Hack (eds), *ibid.*, 1–19.

Philippines and adopt a descriptive and somewhat anecdotal approach. At the same time, scant critical attention has been paid to the internment of nurses in Indonesia despite a wealth of material kept in the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and National Archives of Australia (NAA).

Military nurses provide a unique opportunity for the investigation of combat zones and internment camps. Their distinctive vantage point originates from their ambiguous position as healthcare professionals and ranking officers, as well as white women and internees in a predominantly Asian environment and, more specifically, the captive environment. Upon release, the experiences of these nurses were often recorded differently from their male counterparts by journalists in print or broadcast media, and later by the nurses themselves in published memoirs. In an attempt to articulate and perhaps understand their encounters with internment, the nurses, and others writing about them, often defined and verbalised their experiences in relation to male POWs. This has had a significant effect on popular memory in Australia and the ways in which the stories recounted by these nurses were politically utilised and manipulated in the post-war period.

My current research explores these issues through the case study of the Australian nurses interned on Sumatra in the camps at Muntok, Palembang, Bukit Besar, Ireneaan, Loebok Linggau and Lahat between their capture by the Japanese in February 1942 and their liberation by Allied forces in September 1945. Sixty-five members of the AANS left Singapore on 12 February, twelve of whom were lost at sea when their evacuation craft, the *Vyner Brooke*, was sunk by the Japanese. During the evacuation of Singapore, the 131 serving members of the AANS were divided among three ships; the *Vyner Brooke*, the *Empire Star* and the *Wah Sui*. Only the nurses who left aboard the *Empire Star* and *Wah Sui* eventually arrived in Australia and the stories told by the nurses aboard would fuel speculations over what had happened to their colleagues for the duration of the war. After the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, a further twenty-two were shot by enemy forces after washing ashore on Bangka Island. The remaining thirty-two nurses were imprisoned on Sumatra for over three years; eight died during internment, leaving twenty-four to return to Australia in October 1945.

Planning to sail to Java via Sumatra, the group aboard the *Vyner Brooke* hoped to gain cover from patrolling Japanese pilots by sailing at reduced speed through the Bangka Strait. Sumatra had been ostensibly under Dutch control since 1904, but foreigners had never been a welcome influence on the highly diverse and autonomous indigenous population. An interesting further study might examine the effect this had on the amount of support interned Europeans received from the local population in comparison to other camps across the Pacific. This indigenous autonomy was particularly significant as, at the start of the Pacific War, the island had only a relatively small European population consisting largely of rubber planters and petroleum engineers. However, the oil fields at Telaga Said and Duri, and the island's strategic importance, made it a primary target during the Japanese advance.

The majority of the survivors of the attack on the *Vyner Brooke* washed ashore close to the town of Mentok, where they were collected by the Japanese in the town's Customs House and cinema. However, twenty-two members of the AANS came ashore on Mentok Beach on Bangka Island, along with a group of injured military men, civilian women

and children. It is the dramatic nature of their testimony that has made it a popular focus of historical writings. After forming camp, the women and children were dispatched to seek assistance, while the nurses remained behind to care for the wounded. They were intercepted by a group of Japanese soldiers who separated the injured men from the group and executed them. Upon their return, the Japanese soldiers shot the remaining nurses. Staff Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel was the only survivor; she eventually joined the other members of the AANS at Mentok after several days in the jungle trying to conceal her wounds.⁴

As the nurses were still wearing their uniforms and Red Cross armbands, and because Bullwinkel was able to testify at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal in 1946 and 1948, there was an attempt to prosecute the perpetrators. However, no official responsibility was ever assigned for the killings on Bangka Island. The Australian military authorities suspected that 'Lieutenant O.M.', of the 229th Regiment had issued the execution orders. He returned to Tokyo after the war and was intercepted by the Japanese authorities in September 1948, but committed suicide a few days later in Sagamo prison.⁵

The Australian public heard about what became known as the 'Bangka Island Massacre' through print and broadcast media in September 1945 when the surviving members of the AANS were released. My preliminary research into published reader letters and comments from a range of newspapers and magazines from that time reveals that the public desired some sense of 'justice' in relation to the event, not only from their own government but also from the international authorities. On 29 September, *The Australian Women's Weekly*, a weekly magazine with a predominately female readership established in Sydney in 1933, published the following in an editorial under the headline 'Massacre of Nurses':

Civilian nurses, bound on errands of mercy among the worse under-world dens, are never in danger from the most hardened criminals. But Australia's nurses were not safe from the Japanese. No British citizen forgets the name of Edith Cavell. Australia now has her own Edith Cavells to remember.⁶

The mention of Edith Cavell, a British nurse shot for helping Allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Brussels during the First World War, is important and represents more than an effort by the Australian media to produce new national heroes as part of the development of a collective Australian memory in the immediate post-war period. What this comment exemplifies is a search for a language with which to explain and explore Australian captive experiences. The somewhat self-conscious comparison with Cavell, perhaps designed to appeal to the magazine's predominantly female readership, also illustrates the need for the Australian media to appropriate British cultural legends,

⁴ Vivian Bullwinkel's original sworn statement collected for the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal is held at the AWM in Canberra (AWM54553/6/2) and the original case file can be viewed at the Melbourne Branch of the NAA (MP742/1, 336/1/1976).

⁵ Yuki Tanaka discusses these events in more detail in 'Rape and War: The Japanese Experience'.

Ch. 3 of *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 73–111.

⁶ *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 September 1945, 10

something that would happen with decreasing frequency throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Like Cavell, popular memory of the Bangka Island execution was shaped by the media, and not until recently have scholars begun to consider the implications of the act.

In the post-war period, the events on Bangka Island overshadowed the experiences of the nurses interned on Sumatra, both in popular memory and historical discussion. During interviews with the press, and in their own memoirs, the imprisoned nurses characterise their encounters in similar ways to male POWs, focusing on practical rather than emotional hardships. On an immediate level, they mention lack of food and medical supplies, filthy conditions, cruelty and death but on a collective level they speak retrospectively in terms of resentment, stoicism, resistance and resourcefulness. Furthermore, as the camps were largely purpose-built structures in dense jungle there are underlying frontier themes relating to Europeans surviving in alien environments.⁷ In the media, many of the nurses articulated their experiences in relation to their male counterparts. Nurses released from Rabaul in September 1945 were quoted by *Australian Women's Weekly* as saying that 'Compared to lots of the men... we were lucky'.⁸

Historical writing on the Sumatran nurses juxtaposes the extreme events of Bangka Island with those held in the POW camps, who tended to minimise the extent of their personal struggle for survival. As Australian military historian Hank Nelson has noted, public and scholarly focus on such extreme cases as Bangka Island is understandable but it produces several problems. An unbalanced account is created which fails to contextualise the overall POW experience and neglects equally valid prisoner testimonies. As a result, somewhat radical conclusions are drawn, for example the assumption that the Japanese, because of cultural and military conditioning, were more likely to abuse their prisoners. Furthermore, ongoing scholarship is likely to reinforce these parameters, particularly as new testimonies are recorded and ex-POWs become unwilling to contradict existing evidence because of a desire to preserve established preconceptions or an unwillingness to disparage the dead.⁹

In the Sumatran example, the media played a crucial role in the construction of popular memory, something which had begun even before the nurses were released. Thanks to the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross and testimony from those who fled Singapore, the Australian government knew that a significant number of AANS nurses were imprisoned on Sumatra. Between February 1942 and September 1945, the press ran regular stories on the missing nurses and when they were finally liberated, ABC war correspondent Haydon Lennard organised a plane specifically to collect them. Media coverage of the repatriation of the nurses was widespread and immediate; any images used are careful to conceal the nurses' emaciated condition beneath their

⁷ See Jeffrey, *op. cit.* (note 1), and Simons, *op. cit.* (note 1), as well as Alice M. Bowman's *Not Now Tomorrow ima nai ashita* (Bungalow, NSW: Daisy Press, 1996).

⁸ *The Australian Women's Weekly*, *op. cit.* (note 6), 9

⁹ Hank Nelson, 'Beyond Slogans: Assessing the Experiences and the History of the Australian Prisoners of War of the Japanese', in Blackburn and Hack, *op. cit.* (note 2), 23–40: 31

service uniforms. Such intense international attention would naturally affect how the nurses related their experiences. The nurses themselves did not begin to produce memoirs until the early 1950s, when a market for POW memoirs had already been well established by their male counterparts. Published at the height of the White Australia policy, these works are often overly simplistic in their narrative and racially inappropriate, frequently describing a duality between the animalistic and the human when characterising their Japanese tormentors. Aside from reflecting wider cultural trends, it is important to remember that attempts to dehumanise and vilify the enemy are established coping strategies for those emerging from traumatic encounters. The circumstances that produced these memoirs seem to have gone unrecognised by nursing historians, and current scholarship is still largely biographical in nature.

In the mid-1980s, during the rise of women's history in Australia, the testimony of the AANS nurses was used to create a female embodiment of the Anzac Legend, the nationalistic idea that Australian soldiers or 'Diggers', possessed distinctive qualities that made them superior warriors. However, as the Anzac Legend was a post-First World War construction, it was usually the testimony of nurses serving in this war that caused them to be known as 'Digger Sisters'. Most recently, the Sumatran nurses have found a place in Japanese scholarship regarding military comfort women. Through re-examining documents released by the Japanese government in the 1990s as well as archives in Holland and Australia, scholars such as Yoshimi Yoshiaki and Yuki Tanaka have sought to demonstrate that these nurses were forced into prostitution as part of a government-controlled system that provided Japanese servicemen with comfort women.¹⁰ The evidence for this is inconclusive and, when asked in an interview for *The Australian* newspaper in 1992, the surviving AANS members denied such claims.¹¹ While there are gaps between experience, testimony, popular memory and history it is unhelpful to fill these gaps with conclusions that are somewhat radical and difficult to support.

At present, it is clear that the experiences of the nurses on Sumatra have been employed by highly politicised historiographies, and this has created a popular memory that is in some ways more powerful than the experiences themselves. This situation is similar to what happened to male POW scholarship in the 1960s, when quasi-fictional works such as *Bridge over the River Kwai* mythologised the POW experience to the point where it eclipsed and undermined the testimony of ex-prisoners. In the case of the nurses, this process began in the immediate post-war period, when the media and memoirs shaped popular memory with what were perceived to be appropriate national representations. What is needed with regard to the nurses on Sumatra is a critical

¹⁰ Yoshimi Yoshiaki published his finding in Japanese in *idem* (ed.), *Jugun ianfu shiryoshu* [*Documents on Military Comfort Women*] (Tokyo: Otsuki shoten, 1992) and analysed them further in *Comfort Women* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1995). Further work was then undertaken by Tanaka in *Hidden Horrors, op. cit.* (note 5), and both scholars continue to work on the subject.

¹¹ After Yoshiaki first published his findings, large numbers of former comfort women emerged to

testify and seek compensation as part of a large-scale legal campaign against the government in Japan. Various newspapers in Australia then attempted to locate more former comfort women, and it was during this search that the surviving members of the AANS were contacted. However, in interviews conducted as part of a prolonged discourse in *The Age* and *The Australian* newspapers between December 1992 and January 1993, the nurses repeatedly denied any sexual involvement with their Japanese guards.

Angharad Fletcher

reappraisal of the sources and the camps themselves in a concerted effort to recontextualise their experiences. Scholars need to explore not only what actually happened in the Indonesian camps, but also why the nurses have been remembered so differently from other camps and internees, including other groups of medical personnel interned in the Pacific.