

An Anzac Story – Finding the Nurses in Sumatra

Tas Military Nurses Project, Peter Henning, henning@vision.net.au

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On 15 February 1942, the day that Singapore fell to the Japanese, a ship named the Vyner Brooke was sunk in the Banka Strait, off the north coast of Sumatra. Among its passengers were 65 Australian army nurses. Twenty two of them made it to a beach on Banka Island where 21 of them were murdered by Japanese troops. Twelve others were either drowned or murdered by the Japanese. Thirty two were captured and held as POWS, including one who was left for dead in the beach massacre. Eight of them died in captivity. Only 24 survived the war. Two of them, interestingly both Tasmanian-born, Jessie Simons and Betty Jeffrey, wrote books about their lives in captivity, both books published in 1954.

This is the story of how these 24 nurses were found and rescued in September 1945, as seen through the eyes of Jessie Simons, Betty Jeffrey and the men who found them.

Finding the nurses in Sumatra was a result of the amazing efforts of a British officer who was parachuted into Sumatra with a team of four men just before the war ended. Major Gideon Jacobs' team of four consisted of two Australians, one Dutchman and one Chinese Javanese, and they jumped from their Catalina flying boat transport into Japanese occupied territory

about 100 kilometres from Medang with orders to gather intelligence and radio information back to SEAC headquarters (Mountbatten's south-east Asian command). Several days later they were ordered (by radio) to make contact with Japanese military authorities in Medang and demand assistance in their mission. This they did, but most significantly, Jacobs was immediately contacted by several European civilians, former internees, who briefed him on the dire conditions in POW camps throughout Sumatra. Jacobs immediately ordered the Japanese to take him to all POW camps in Sumatra, far and wide, while also arranging for evidence to be collected wherever he went about Japanese atrocities. When he was in Palembang at the beginning of September, one of the investigations he had set in train provided information from a number of different sources that Australian nurses had been in a camp there but had been moved to another location. Jacobs then realised that the Japanese had kept information from him about the location of the nurses. They deliberately kept secret the existence of the camp at Belalau rubber plantation, about 15 kilometres from the small town of Lubuklinggau, because they wanted to try to improve the physical condition of the nurses before they were found.

This is how it was done. On 19 August, four days after the Japanese emperor ordered Japanese forces throughout the conquered territories to lay down their arms, the nurses were visited in their camp by a "high Japanese official". Soon after this, when the Japanese ordered that children in the camp whose mothers had died but whose fathers were interned in another camp be moved permanently to be with their fathers, Jessie Simons commented: "As some of the children were by now quite young women the order was rather more strange than usual, even by Jap standards. It looked as though something big was in the air...". On 23 August, which happened to be Simons' 34th birthday, "we were ... told that an important announcement would be made the next day". So it was that on 24 August the nurses were told by the brutal Japanese commandant, Captain Saki: "Now there is peace, and we will all soon be leaving Sumatra. If we have made any mistakes in the past we hope you will forgive us, and now we can be friends". Saki then allowed "some vegetables for us, and boxes and boxes of medical stores, bandages, quinine, vitamin tablets, serums, powdered milk, butter etc". During the following week the camp kitchens were stocked with plentiful supplies of rice and carrots, and freed men from a nearby camp brought in fresh meat and fruit, and then took over looking after the women. On 29 August Betty Jeffrey wrote that "today we all had half a cup of milk, the first for years. We are getting bacon and papaya each day. It is a wonderful feeling not to be ravenously hungry all day long". In the first week of September Jeffrey recorded in her diary: "Things are coming in each day now. They have apparently been here for ages – things we have asked for over and over again, medicines we begged for and were refused, so our women died. To think they had so much stuff so close to our camp...".

It was during this time that Major Jacobs was finally told by the Japanese about the camp. He immediately flew to Lahat with his team, drove to Lubuklinggau, where the two

Australian radio operators established a base to communicate with Ceylon, and the other three men went to Belalau. "The Allies have arrived!", wrote Betty Jeffrey on 7 September. "Two very young Dutch soldiers and a Chinese military man arrived today". Jacobs had arrived in mid-afternoon, and only had time to register his shock at what he considered the worst camp he had visited in Sumatra, before returning to Lubuklinggau to prepare for a more thorough investigation. He returned on 9 September, and it was on this day that he discovered that some of the European women in the camp were the missing Australian nurses. After forcing the Japanese to identify all their local storehouses and open them for the camp to use, Jacobs hurried back to Lubuklinggau once more, to report the news to Colombo. The message his two Australian radio operators sent was the first real news that the outside world heard of the location of the Vyner Brooke nurses since they left Singapore in February 1942:

"Have encountered among 250 repeat 250 British female internees in LoebukLinggau camp Sister Nesta James and 23 other surviving members of the Australian Army Nursing Services remnants of contingent AANS evacuated from Malaya in Vyner Brooke stop In view of their precarious health suggest you endeavour arrange air transport direct to Australia from here soonest stop Am collecting particulars massacre of members AANS on Bangka Island for later transmission".

On 11 September Jacobs and the two Australians (only identified as Sergeant Bates and Sergeant Gillam) returned to the camp, causing great excitement among the nurses. Vivian Bullwinkel was the first to see the Australian military badges and rushed to tell the others that "Australians are here!". According to Betty Jeffrey it was "these two boys" who told them about the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that they could no longer hold any reservations about the war having been ended and having been won. They were free at last. But the nurses had no idea of the shock that their physical appearance gave to the two Australians. Gillam became so enraged at how they had been treated by the Japanese that he lined all the guards up along the barbed wire fence of the camp, and it took some careful persuasion by Jacobs that the Japanese would face prosecution for their crimes before Gillam decided not to shoot them.

Once the news about the nurses became known, planes based at Cocos Island flew low over their camp and the nearby men's camp and dropped food parcels. On 14 September the nurses ate bread baked on Cocos Island the day before, "half a slice each with butter and Vegemite, and it was like sponge cake".

The next day, while Colonel Annie Sage and Captain Jean Floyd were on their way to Palembang by air, the nurses were "plucking ducks and fowls in preparation for (a birthday party for one of the internees, not a nurse), we were interrupted by a message that the AANS and sick internees were to prepare for immediate evacuation. Feathers flew everywhere", wrote Jessie Simons.

At 4 am the next morning, a group of 60 women, including the 24 Australian nurses, departed in trucks while it was raining, and it took three hours to travel to Lubuklinggau, because one of the Japanese drivers “saw to it that his truck broke down every half mile”. The accounts by Jessie Simons and Betty Jeffrey of their journey from Belalau prison camp to the airstrip at Lahat are among the most vivid and detailed descriptions of any of their experiences, demonstrating the sheer impact of what was happening to them. At Lubuklinggau they were met by an Australian air force pilot and an Australian war correspondent, Haydon Lennard, who had been trying to find the nurses since the end of the war, and who finally made contact with Major Jacobs and his team. The nurses were now told that two planes were on their way from Singapore to Lahat to collect them, and that a train had been organised to take them the 90 mile journey from Lubuklinggau to Lahat. When they arrived at Lahat at midday on 16 September they were told that only one plane would be coming from Singapore, and that 30 of the 60 women would have to wait for one more day before being evacuated, but it was decided that all the Australian nurses would fly out on the first plane.

Jessie Simons described the unforgettable moments in the lives of the nurses when the plane arrived at Lahat:

“Someone heard a drone, another scoffed, and we all paused to listen and scan the sky for the approaching plane. At last the bright afternoon sun flashed its signal from the big silver wings of a Douglas transport as it circled the strip and swung in to land among the palms. Our suspense had been justified by the arrival of only one plane and, as we watched it roll towards us, we felt a passing regret for the party which would have to stay at least another night in Sumatra.

The Douglas had barely stopped before a door was swung open and a tall, slim Australian, Major Windso of the 2/14th AGH, jumped down and raced towards us, followed a little more sedately by three nurses in tropical kit and slacks. Only when Major Windsor called, “Which are the Australian nurses”, did we realise how unrecognisable the remains of our old grey uniforms had become. When the first confusion had passed, one of us asked the senior nurse, “Who are you?” She replied, “I am the mother of you all.” It was Matron Sage, Matron-in-Chief of the AANS. With her were Sister Chandler of the RAAF and Sister Floyd, one of the original staff of the 2/10th AGH to which some of the girls had belonged. Running an eye over the group Matron Sage enquired, “Why, where are the the rest of you? Weren’t there thirty two nurses in the party?” Our silence gave the answer before we found words to tell of the eight over whose graves in Muntock or LoeboekLinggau we had erected those rough crosses.” Sage and Floyd then went to the hospital at Lahat to stay with the others women who would be evacuated from Sumatra the next day.

As they flew out, Jessie Simons “caught a fleeting view of Irenelaan”, the site of the horrific camp they were incarcerated in at Palembang, and then later, in the fading light, the nurses

tried “to identify Singapore landmarks from the unfamiliar height of 2,000 feet. Below we would see rubbish and ruins, legacy of the bombardment we so well remembered, but there would be no sudden spurts of smoke and debris, no heavy pouring smoke from burning oil. All that was over”. The nurses landed in Singapore “with feelings which cannot be recaptured or repeated, but soon we were overwhelmed by the welcome waiting for us....”.

Peter Henning

(This is an edited extract from a forthcoming book about Tasmanian military nurses during the Second World War)

Simons, *While History Passed*, pp. 110-111; Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, pp. 189-190.

Jeffrey, p. 190; Manners, *Bullwinkel*, pp. 174-175.

Jeffrey, p. 192; Manners, pp. 173-174.

Jeffrey p. 192; Simons, p. 115.

Jeffrey, pp. 194-199; Simons, pp. 116-120.

Simons, p. 119.

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