

Angels under fire



Image 1 of 3

Queen Alexandra nurses with recently liberated servicemen, Singapore, 1945

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Military nurses who came under Japanese attack in the Far East during the Second World War endured bombing, shipwreck, torture and imprisonment - and many were brutally executed. Nicola Tyrer, in her harrowing account of these sisters in arms, relates two remarkable tales of survival

Singapore, with her massive guns pointing warningly out to sea and her heavyweight Royal Navy presence, was regarded by the British as an impregnable fortress. And as news of the fall of Hong Kong stunned the Allies, the 50 Queen Alexandra nurses (QAs) who had sailed out of Liverpool in July 1940 must have been grateful that their destination was Singapore.

Their relief was short-lived. Six weeks after Hong Kong fell the Japanese war machine exposed Singapore's famous guns as impotent - they could not be turned around, and the Japanese attacked from the land. For the dozens of Sisters fleeing the blazing and encircled colony of Singapore in the second week of February 1941, the nightmare was only just beginning. For the first time in the history of the war they found themselves in the frontline - dodging bombs and shellfire to rescue the wounded and becoming caught in crossfire between their own troops and the enemy.

The first bombs fell on Singapore on December 7, 1941, the same day that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. Simultaneously they landed men and supplies at two points in Thailand close to the Malayan

border. The unremitting Japanese air raids pounded the island. As one hospital was bombed out another tried to absorb its patients and homeless staff before being forced to evacuate in its turn. At the end of January 1942 the enemy had drawn so close it was decided there was no hope of holding the Malayan mainland.

For such a brief campaign the Allied casualties were enormous - almost 9,000 dead, compared to 3,500 for the Japanese. Olive Spedding, who had been a matron in an upcountry hospital, described the desperate situation. By now only three hospitals were still treating the wounded.

'The wards were quickly filled to overflowing as one after another of the hospitals were hit, till eventually No 20 (ours), Alexandra and BMH Johore were the only military hospitals functioning... We had many shell-shocked patients, who were, I think, the most pathetic of all. When the din had worked up to a crescendo of shells whining overhead, bombs bursting and our AA guns banging away, one found them in all sorts of odd corners and it was difficult to prevent them running out into the open...'

The fall of Singapore was just a matter of time, and on February 15 General Percival, the Commander-in-Chief Malaya, surrendered. Before he did so he ordered the evacuation, not just of thousands of civilians, but of military nurses too. The order to abandon patients was seen as unprecedented.

Sister Hartley at the Alexandra Hospital expressed the general consternation. 'We felt as though the bottom had fallen out of our little world. The hospital was full to overflowing - everybody was working at top speed - our poor boys lying all over the floor and they were coolly saying we must go. The faces of those boys watching us leave, were saying, "It's all up now".'

The last heavily overladen ships left Singapore on February 12 and 13 - which happened to be a Friday. Superstition was the last thing on anybody's mind. But the fate of those who sailed on the 13th was to differ tragically from their colleagues whose ship sailed a day earlier.

In the hospitals still functioning there was a state of near chaos regarding the evacuation of nursing staff. At first nurses who wanted to get out were asked to volunteer. Then, because so many opted to stay on, names were chosen at random for immediate evacuation. About 30 left on February 11, sailing the next day. On the morning of Friday, February 13, the order came through that all nursing staff must leave.

It was an eight-mile hike from the Alexandra to the docks and the procession was under constant attack from machine guns and dive bombers. The roads were filled with hundreds of retreating troops and when the planes came over everyone took cover in the 'Singapore ditches', as the open sewers that lined the road were called, emerging with soaked and stinking clothing. Eventually everyone reached the docks - where a scene of utter confusion awaited them.

Both Evelyn Cowens and Catherine Maudsley were among the lucky ones who got away from Singapore on Thursday, February 12. Cowens describes the chaos that awaited them at the docks. 'Our next difficulty was to find the ship. The docks were on fire and no one knew the way. For nearly one hour we dashed about trying to find an entrance that was not burning, and dodging the planes overhead. Finally we found it and scrambled on board...'

The ship they sailed on was the Empire Star, a modest straits steamer designed for taking civilian passengers on short hops between the islands. She had 24 cabins and no lifebelts. On that trip she was carrying 2,500

passengers. The nurses slept on bare boards in the hold with only tin hats and gas masks to act as pillows and between 8am and midday suffered constant air attacks from up to 100 planes.

Cowens was still wearing the stinking clothes from when she took shelter in the sewer: 'For four hours we had raids, the last one consisted of 57 enemy planes which did a great deal of damage... the ship had seven direct hits... It was a terrifying experience; several times the ship pitched over to one side but managed to right herself and plod steadily on. After each lurch it was like sweet music to hear the throb of the engines...!' There was hardly any food aboard and the officers shared their meagre rations - tins of army biscuits and corned beef - with the nurses, who gratefully drank the tea - which was regularly brewed up in buckets - out of cigarette tins.

To the immense relief of everyone the ship eventually outran the Japanese and reached safety at Batavia (now the capital of Indonesia, Djakarta). Maudsley was put on an evacuee ship bound for Ceylon almost straight away. Cowens opted to stay at the Dutch Military Hospital nursing British troops. She was later offered a passage to Bombay on a troopship.

For their colleagues who had volunteered to stay on in Singapore the outcome was to be tragically different. While still taking on passengers, SS Kuala was attacked by wave after wave of enemy aircraft, killing dozens of passengers and a QA. The ship was carrying 600 people, 500 of whom were civilians. Half of these were women and children. Scores were injured by shrapnel fragments and flying glass. As the nurses did their best to bind up the bleeding wounds, with children screaming and the injured moaning, the atmosphere was one of utter panic.

There were about 50 nurses on board, including civilians and military nurses from the other services. The master of the Kuala had decided to sail at night when they were less visible to aircraft, and lie to during the day. They had just sent men ashore in boats to camouflage the ship with branches and thatch when the planes came over. The women heard a warning shout to take cover and the ship was rocked by a massive explosion as the bridge suffered a direct hit and the boiler room caught fire.

With the stricken vessel sinking fast the order came to abandon ship. There were only two lifeboats and not nearly enough lifebelts. Terrified passengers, some bleeding from serious injuries, distraught mothers with babies in their arms and screaming toddlers clutching their skirts, paralysed adults who couldn't swim - all were forced to jump from the blazing ship into the water where a fierce current was sweeping away from the island and out to the open sea.

They hung on to whatever they could - mattresses, chairs - anything that floated. An Australian Sister found her hand caught up in the hair of a Chinese girl who had lost a leg. And even as this helpless human flotsam clung to life the Japanese came swooping down and strafed them, hitting one of the lifeboats and catapulting the passengers back into the sea.

One QA, Dorothy Garvin, estimated that half the last batch of QAs to leave Singapore were killed. The nurses who managed to get into lifeboats did their best to tend the wounded but many were beyond help. Sister Hartley remembers, 'Dr Margaret Thompson was in the boat and a soldier boy... He had a head injury, fractured lower arm and fracture of lower leg... Dr herself was injured... but she was rowing as though nothing was wrong with her. A mother arrived with two children, one baby... as she was 'blue' [sic] I... smacked her hard and she was all right, and then my attention was called to Mrs Dunlop, but I saw I

could do nothing... she died within five minutes of my getting into the boat. I then had to put her into the sea and then later the soldier also died... We now had about 35 people. Another soldier with a large wound in his back died and also was put into the sea.'

Garvin eventually managed to get into one of the lifeboats and reach Pom Pong, the island where the crew of the Kuala had been collecting thatch to camouflage the ship. Only 500 survivors made it there - 400 people perished in the sea, either through drowning or as a result of machine-gunning from the air.

There was no food on the island. They were so hungry that when a seagull dropped a piece of fish, they washed it in the sea and shared it out. Garvin survived on a daily square inch of bully beef and a biscuit from the meagre rations that had survived the wreck. In the first few hours, as they tried to look after the injured as best they could, she notes, 'Several of us were flying round in our knickers, just as if we were in stiffly starched caps and aprons at home.'

The water situation was critical. One barrel had been washed ashore and there was only one small spring on the island which was sufficient to provide half a mugful night and morning. They couldn't wash as the sea was covered in oil from the wrecks. A few first-aid kits that had been found in the lifeboats were all that was available to treat the injured.

But with so many nurses among the survivors it wasn't long before the men were put to work building beds, and a mini tropical hospital, complete with duty rotas, was established.

Garvin threw herself into the work: 'We had about 20 stretcher cases (on real desert island beds made from canvas and the boughs of trees by the engineers). We got a lady doctor the second day... She went off in a lifeboat later with two Sisters to another small island without help.'

They even took turns at night duty, five Sisters lying next to each other on the ground using the one waterproof watch that had survived the shipwreck to wake the next one up after three-hour watches. None the less, with so many seriously injured people without access to medical facilities, conditions must have been dreadful. Many died and graves for them were dug on the island, with rough crosses erected on which their names were scratched.

The hunger of the survivors was eased to some extent when Malays from a neighbouring island brought food and fruit. The Dutch authorities were informed of the plight of the shipwrecked civilians, and the following night, (as the straits were being constantly patrolled by Japanese fighter planes), they sent a small cargo ship, the Tanjong Penang. About 20 wounded men, 180 women and children, and most of the Sisters were put on board. It was decided that the Sisters who were off duty would go, while those who were on duty would stay with the patients who were too ill to be moved. After the boat's departure the island camp was down to about 300, of whom 200 were troops.

Dorothy Garvin had had the opportunity of getting away on that first boat, but was concerned about an injured woman doctor who was marooned on the other side of the island and opted to stay on. After two more days a small motor trawler turned up at night, sent by the Dutch Government to take off the remaining wounded and the nurses.

One of the Sisters who had agreed to go aboard the Tanjong Penang was a QA called Margot Turner, who had started her overseas service in an up-country hospital in Malaya. They embarked the passengers, many of whom had to be carried on, on the night of February 16 and sailed early the next day. Margot spent the

day dressing wounds and handing out rations of food and water. The boat was crowded with survivors from other shipwrecks. All the patients and the women and children were placed in the hold, but the captain allowed the Sisters to sleep on deck. They had just settled down at 9pm when the deck was lit up by two dazzling searchlights. Without any warning there were two massive explosions as two shells hit the ship and the deck was suddenly covered with dead and mutilated bodies.

Margot Turner reports: 'I was lying next to Sister Beatrice le Blanc Smith and there were people dead and dying all round us. Beatrice got a nasty wound in the buttock... My first thought was for the women and children in the hold; but a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse) struggling up from there to the deck, her dress covered in blood, said that the hold had had the full force of one of the shells and was absolutely smashed. In any case I realised that there was nothing I could do as the ship was already at a steep angle and obviously just about to turn over. Beatrice and I just stepped into the sea and were very lucky not to be sucked down when the ship suddenly turned over and sank.'

Just before the ship went down the officers had managed to throw a few small rafts overboard and le Blanc Smith and Turner got hold of two and tied them together. 'The cries and screams of the wounded, the helpless and the dying, were quite terrible.'

The two Sisters swam around and managed to pick up 14 people, including six children, two of whom were babies under a year old. They arranged the rafts with people sitting back to back each holding a child in their lap. The remainder had to stay in the water, hanging on to the lifelines. When dawn broke two had disappeared. The tropical sun, from which they had no protection, scorched them and every day brought more deaths.

'There was only one other person on the raft whom I had ever met before... She died at the end of the first day; and on the second day the children went mad. We had a terrible time with them - and lost them all. I examined each of them with great care before committing their small bodies to the sea. The last one was a very small baby and it was difficult to know when it was dead. I thought 'this is some woman's precious child; I must not let it go until I know it's dead...'. One by one the other women had gone and on the second night, Feb 19, I was left alone with a Mrs Barnett, whom I had never seen before.'

On their third afternoon on the raft Turner and her companion began to see small islands and decided to try to brave the strong currents and paddle towards one, using pieces of driftwood.

'Mrs Barnett let her paddle slip from her grasp and, before I could stop her, she had plunged into the sea after it... I was much too weak to swim after her. I called and strained my eyes to catch sight of her - but there was just nothing. I was now all alone.'

Turner stayed alive by eating seaweed and collecting tiny amounts of rain in the lid of her powder compact, which had miraculously survived two shipwrecks.

On the afternoon of the fourth day she saw a ship. As it came closer she saw that it was a battleship, but her hopes that it would be the Royal Navy were dashed when she saw incredulous Japanese sailors peering down at this wasted young woman, burned dark brown by the sun.

She was hauled aboard. There was a doctor who spoke English and who realised how fragile her condition was. Thirst had made Turner almost delirious, so he gave her some tea, a little drop of whisky and some bread and milk. He treated her painful sunburn, rigged up an awning on deck to protect her and gave her

a shirt and trousers - the remains of her dress had been ripped off as she was hauled aboard on the end of the rope.

Having let her sleep for a while, they roused her later the same night and told her they would put her ashore at Muntok on the island of Banka, off Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies.

It was only nine days since Turner had left Singapore. "To anyone who has not experienced the sudden destruction of a ship at sea, crammed full of women and children, with no lifeboats and lifejackets only for the very few, it is difficult to imagine the sheer ghastliness of the scene. And if on top of all this there is machine-gunning of helpless people in the water, and the darkness of night, it becomes all the more horrible. Those who left the ship alive simply didn't know what to do - or who to try to help; and the wailing of helpless mothers looking for their children, and vice versa, is a sound the survivors are never likely to forget.'

Banka was already in Japanese hands and Turner was now the prisoner of an enemy whose reputation for inhumanity, particularly towards women, was just starting to become known.

All those at home who had relatives caught up in the fall of Singapore suffered agonies of worry as there was simply no news of those who did not reach their intended destinations. The facts about the shipwreck of the Kuala did not become generally known to the British public until four months later - on June 17, 1942 - when a Singapore-based British civilian wrote an article describing their escape and the eventual rescue of some of them by the Dutch and the Royal Navy.

On the fifth night an invasion barge arrived at Pom Pong and took off all the remaining women and the wounded. The party numbered about 40 or 50, with 15 seriously wounded. The barge managed to reach the east coast of Sumatra safely, where the welcoming Dutch fed and clothed them. But Sumatra was on the point of being overrun by the Japanese and there was a mad dash against time to get the refugees across the mountainous country to the west-coast port of Padang, from where they were most likely to be shipped to safety.

The lucky few arrived in Bombay on March 5, three weeks after the fall of Singapore, and were granted rest and recreation after all their ordeals. There they met up with the other QAs who had left Singapore a day earlier on the Empire Star - women such as Catherine Maudsley and Evelyn Cowens.

But while the small handful of survivors were recovering in Bombay, other Queen Alexandra nurses who had survived shipwreck were about to sacrifice what they valued almost as much as life itself - their freedom. Some people seem to be marked out from birth as survivors and Margot Turner was one of them. But before long Turner was to meet another young nurse whose grim story of survival was even more incredible than her own. Vivian Bullwinkel was a 26-year-old Australian nurse who had had to leave Singapore when the 2/10th Australian General Hospital was overrun by the Japanese. Like Turner she sailed on Friday 13 on a ship that was destined to suffer the same fate as the Kuala.

The Vyner Brooke, a small Royal Navy vessel with just one gun, had embarked about 300 people, of whom 65 were Australian army nurses, and was headed for Java when it was attacked by Japanese planes in Singapore harbour. The attack holed all the lifeboats on one side of the ship. The next day the planes returned and scored a succession of direct hits which sank the Vyner Brooke within 15 minutes.

The Australian Sisters stayed together clinging to rafts and whatever of the wreckage remained afloat while strong tides carried them helplessly this way and that. Finally they drifted into a river estuary and were washed up on a beach, which turned out to be Banka island. A fire glowing in the darkness led them to other survivors of the Vyner Brooke, including Irene Drummond, the Australian Sisters' Matron.

Numbers were increased when a lifeboat carrying British servicemen, survivors from a sea battle with the Japanese, arrived. By morning almost 60 men, women and children and 22 Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) members were on the beach without food or water.

The next day a search party of five nurses, including Bullwinkel, set out to ask local people for help, but by now the Japanese were in control of the island, and the villagers, fearing reprisals, refused to help them.

By Monday, February 16, there were about 100, including children, who, through hunger and thirst, were crying constantly. The wounded lay on stretchers on the beach. An officer from the Vyner Brooke decided that as they had no means of looking after the helpless and no way of feeding anyone they should surrender to the Japanese. He agreed to walk to Muntok, the main town. While he was away Matron Drummond suggested that the mothers and children should also start walking towards Muntok with the aim of surrendering.

The officer returned with about 20 Japanese soldiers. Having separated the men from the women the Japanese divided the men into two and marched them at gunpoint along the beach and round a headland. The nurses heard the sound of round after round of gunfire and the Japanese soldiers reappeared. They then marched the other group off round the headland and again shots were heard. The Japanese returned and in front of the horrified nurses sat down on the beach and began cleaning the blood from their bayonets.

The officer then told the nurses to walk towards the sea, shoving those who were reluctant. Twenty-two nurses, all wearing the Red Cross armbands, and one elderly civilian woman who had not wanted to be parted from her husband were forced into the sea until the water came up to their waists. At that point the Japanese machine-gunned them down.

'They just swept up and down the line and the girls fell one after the other. I was towards the end of the line and a bullet got me in the left loin and went straight through and came out towards the front,' Bullwinkel told the War Crimes Tribunal in 1946. 'The conduct of the girls was most courageous. They all knew what was going to happen to them but no one panicked. They just marched ahead with their chins up. We waded into the surf and they fired on us.'

The force of the shot knocked Bullwinkel, a non-swimmer, into the water but she did not pass out. The seawater she had swallowed made her want to vomit, but she knew she dared not show a sign of life. Somehow she managed to turn her head imperceptibly enough to gulp sufficient air to stay breathing until eventually the waves nudged her back to the shore again.

'I lay there 10 minutes and everything seemed quiet, I sat up and looked around and there was no sign of anybody. Then I got up and went into the jungle and lay down and either slept or was unconscious for a couple of days.'

By Wednesday she had recovered sufficiently to drag herself to a freshwater spring close to the beach to slake her burning thirst. Here she discovered that although she was the only woman to have survived the

massacre of the Australian Sisters, there was another survivor. A British private had been among the stretcher cases the Japanese had turned on after they had shot the nurses.

He had suffered shrapnel wounds before reaching the island and had been bayoneted in the chest, and left for dead. The rest of the wounded still lay on their stretchers where they had been murdered. Many years after the war it emerged that two of the men who had been marched round the headland had also survived and one of them, quoted in *Will to Live* by Sir John Smythe, recalled finding the bodies of the other victims. 'It was quite horrible. All the male bodies had been piled on top of one another in one big heap. Then I went further along and found the bodies of the Australian nurses and other women. They lay at intervals of a few hundred yards - in different positions and in different stages of undress. They had been shot and then bayoneted. It was a shocking sight.'

Bullwinkel nursed the badly injured British soldier for about 12 days, begging food from women in the nearby village. When they thought they were both strong enough they decided to try to walk to Muntok, but on February 28 they were picked up by a Japanese officer in a passing car and taken to a prisoner-of-war camp.

The British soldier was transferred to the camp hospital where not long afterwards he died from his injuries. Bullwinkel was reunited with the rest of her Australian colleagues - fellow survivors of the *Vyner Brooke* sinking. Of the original 65 who had left Singapore there were 32 left. Twelve were presumed drowned, 21 had been shot and the rest were prisoners. Over 80 people had been killed on the beach.

Margot Turner was there when Bullwinkel arrived at the camp and knew immediately that she was hiding something. 'She walked quietly in through the door of the jail, clasp an army water bottle to her side. We could see at once why she was doing this - it was to hide a bullet hole in her uniform.'

Vivian Bullwinkel had not meant to tell anyone of her dangerous secret lest the Japanese, realising that there had been a witness to this particularly indefensible act of atrocity, would kill her. But the surviving nurses wanted to know what had happened to friends and colleagues they had last seen clinging to lifeboats, and under pressure from them she described the massacre on the beach. A decision was taken then that it would never be mentioned again until they were free.

- Extracted from 'Sisters In Arms: British Nurses Tell Their Story' by Nicola Tyrer (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), available from Telegraph Books for £18 plus £1.25 p&p (0870-428 4112; books.telegraph.co.uk)