

# Bangka Island: The WW2 massacre and a 'truth too awful to speak'

By Gary Nunn Sydney

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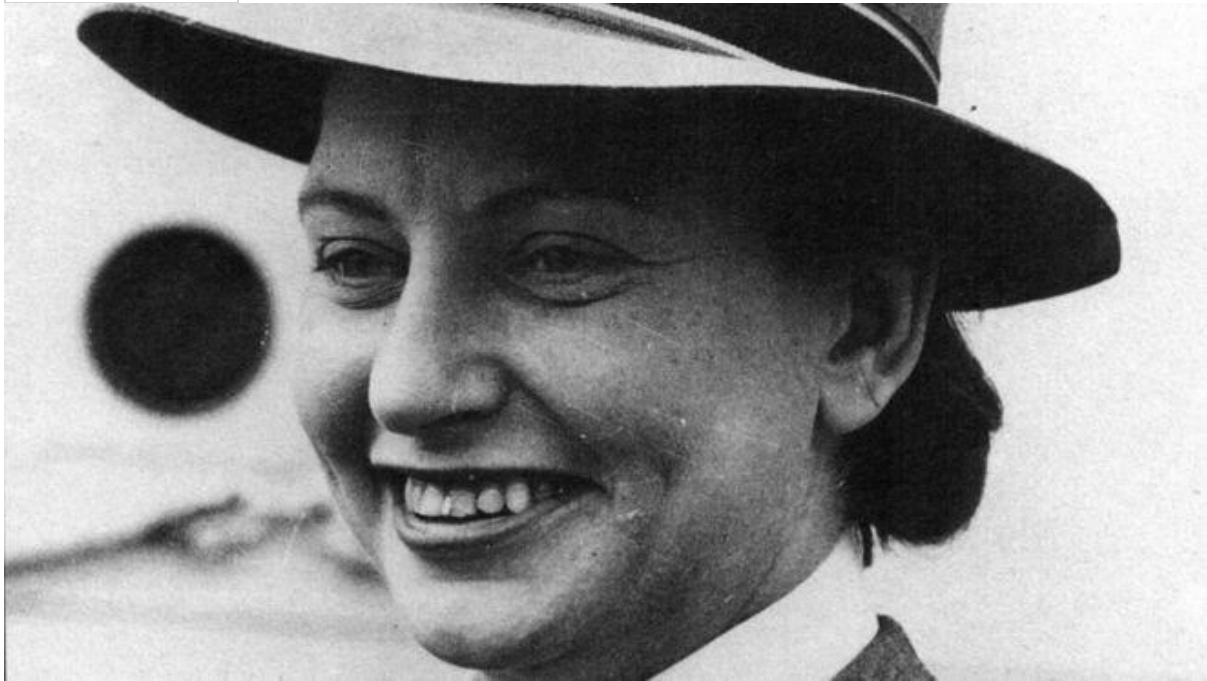


Image copyrightLYNETTE SILVER Image captionVivian Bullwinkel was the sole survivor of the Bangka Island massacre

**In 1942, a group of Australian nurses were murdered by Japanese soldiers in what came to be known as the Bangka Island massacre. Now, a historian has collated evidence indicating they were sexually assaulted beforehand - and that Australian authorities allegedly hushed it up.**

"It took a group of women to uncover this truth - and to finally speak it."

Military historian Lynette Silver is discussing what happened to 22 Australian nurses who were marched into the sea at Bangka Island, Indonesia, and shot with machine guns in February 1942. All except one were killed.

"That was a jolt to the senses enough. But to have been raped beforehand was just too awful a truth to speak," Ms Silver says, speaking of claims she details in a new book.

"Senior Australian army officers wanted to protect grieving families from the stigma of rape. It was seen as shameful. Rape was known as a fate worse than death, and was still a hangable offence [for perpetrators] in New South Wales until 1955."

## The sole survivor

Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel was shot in the massacre but survived by playing dead. She hid in the jungle and was taken as a prisoner of war, before eventually returning to Australia.



Image copyright GETTY IMAGES Image caption Bangka Island lies off Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago

She was "gagged" from speaking about the rapes at the Tokyo war crimes tribunal in the aftermath of World War Two, according to Ms Silver, who researched an account Ms Bullwinkel gave to a broadcaster before she died in 2000.

"She was following orders," Ms Silver says. "In addition to the taboo, there was probably some guilt from the Australian government - senior officers knew Japanese troops had raped and murdered British nurses when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong in 1942, but were tardy in calls to evacuate the Australian nurses from Singapore."

According to the Australian government, the perpetrators of the massacre remain unknown and "escaped any punishment for their crime".

An Australian Defence Force spokesperson says a decision on whether a new investigation into these sexual assault claims will commence is up to the government, but that "new historic allegations can be reported by family" to a unit which investigates such crimes.



Image copyright LYNETEE SILVER Image caption Nurses who were not on Bangka Island arrive back in Singapore after evacuation from Sumatra in 1942

## Investigating what happened

The other women whose work has revealed evidence of these alleged sexual assaults are broadcaster Tess Lawrence and biographer Barbara Angell.

Ms Angell did forensic work into the mismatching thread and bullet holes in Ms Bullwinkel's nurse's uniform.

It indicated that buttons had been ripped off her bodice and sewn on in a different colour thread (after her death, when it was put on display), and the only way the bullet entry and exit holes lined up was if her bodice was open at the waist and down at the front.

**Ms Lawrence reported in 2017** that, before she died, Ms Bullwinkel confided in her that "most of" the nurses were "violated" before being shot, and that she'd wanted to reveal this but couldn't - a secret, she said, that "tortured" her.

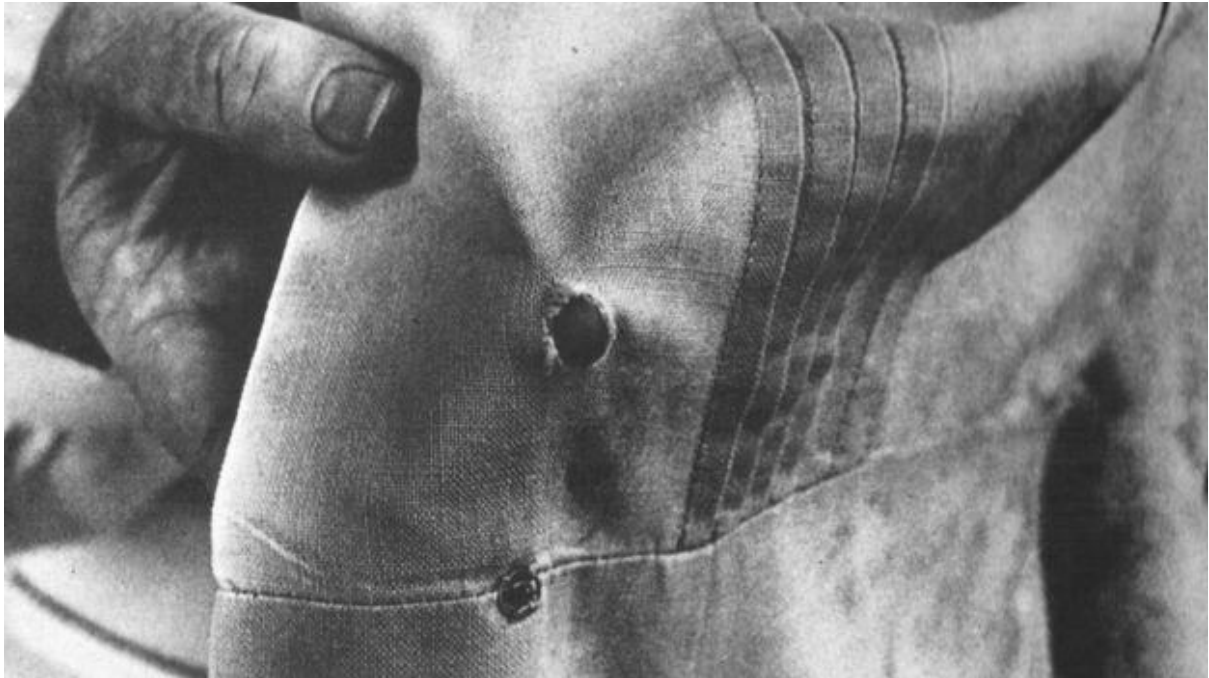


Image copyright LYNETTE SILVER Image caption Bullet holes in Vivian Bullwinkel's nurse's uniform

The Australian historian also cites an account of a Japanese soldier who was being treated for malaria nearby on Bangka Island, which is off Sumatra. He told an Australian investigating officer that he heard screams and was told soldiers were "pleasuring themselves on the beach and it'd be the turn of platoon next".

In addition, Ms Silver discovered that part of a page detailing what happened to the nurses in a key account had been ripped out, in what she believes was an act of censorship.

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The account was by Jean Williams, wife of Major Harold Williams, about investigations he conducted for the Australian War Crimes Section.

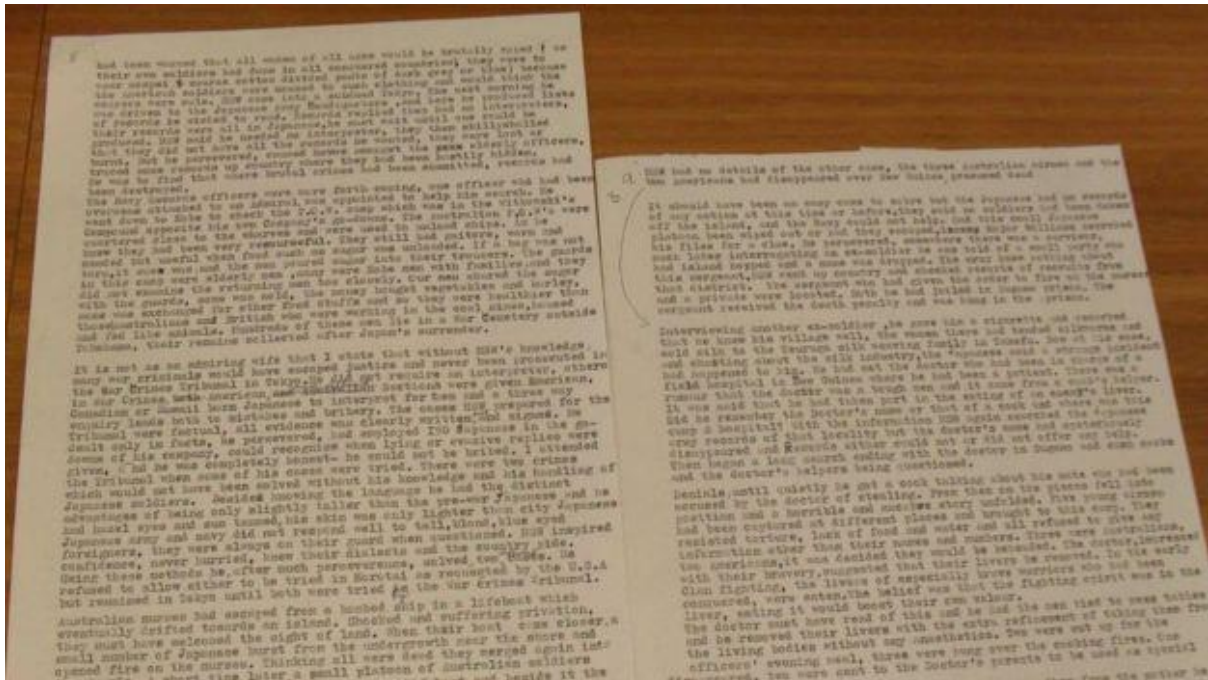


Image copyright LYNETTE SILVER Image caption A passage of Jean Williams' historical account was removed

Peter Stanley, a military history professor at University of New South Wales, says Ms Silver's account doesn't surprise him: "I've been waiting for this story to come out - it has been alleged for years, including by ex-servicemen who knew Vivian Bullwinkel and told me. It correlates with on-the-record sexual assaults by Japanese WW2 soldiers in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Singapore."

## The army's 'darlings'

Before the massacre, Ms Silver says the Australian nurses had "a carefree, happy life" in Singapore until the end of 1941.

"They were wined and dined - the darlings of the army," she says. "They were just dealing with the usual complaints you get in army peacetime - accidents in training, car accidents, malaria."

When the Japanese attacked on 8 December 1941 - a few hours before Pearl Harbor - their lives changed, she says: "They were overwhelmed with battle casualties. Even houses in Singapore were transformed into hospitals."

Ms Silver says she sees it as important to speak the "unsanitised truth" that Vivian Bullwinkel had wanted to tell in 1945 and 1946.

"If I didn't tell this secret, I'd be part of the culture of silence and the government clampdown, and protecting the perpetrators," she says. "These nurses deserve to have their story told - that's their justice."



She has recently received emails from people who personally knew the nurses. "I was slightly concerned people might say I should let sleeping dogs lie, but I haven't received a single derogatory remark," she says.

Ms Silver now wants the Australian War Memorial (AWM), which already includes the story of the massacre, to tailor its tours to include this account of the alleged sexual assaults.

AWM director Dr Brendan Nelson tells the BBC: "We don't deny or downplay these allegations; indeed, it's known rape and sexual assault are used as weapons in war. Nevertheless, as the sole survivor the incident, Lt Col Bullwinkel, passed away nearly 20 years ago, we do not, nor can ever categorically know what took place."

## **#MeToo comparison**

Ms Silver draws parallels with the #MeToo movement: "The same social mores are at play - whereby women felt compelled to wait before they could say anything. As victims, they're made to feel responsible. I think #MeToo would've given Vivian Bullwinkel the confidence to finally speak up."



Image copyright LYNETTE SILVER Image caption Lynette Silver has won awards for her work as a "historical detective"

"Female history writers are generally more interested in the human element than how many guns there were. As a female, you have empathy."

She said it was revealing that it was three female historians who uncovered the evidence for this story: "I've heard of history being told as 'his-story'. This was the opposite of that."