

## NELL ALLGROVE

### WARTIME EXPERIENCE

Copy of the speech meeting Adelaide on 15 February 1988, as guest of honour at RSL sisters dinner, having attended the memorial service at the Women's playing fields Adelaide, on Sunday, 14 February 1988. The ceremony is held on the nearest Sunday to 16th February, as it is known as "Banka day" being the anniversary of the massacre of 21 sisters. Sister Vivian Bullwinkel made the 22nd sister shot, but she survived. Bullwinkel joined us in camp in Muntok about the 22nd, 23rd February 1942.

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#### Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I have been asked to tell you something of POW days. As you appreciate nearly four years experience cannot be condensed into 15 minutes. Looking back, I realise that my Australian upbringing, between the two world wars, plus a very healthy heritage, the discipline of nursing training and army life, were the foundation for the endurance of both mind and body during those four years. One cannot live without discipline, law and order, otherwise chaos reigns.

We, 65 sisters, were forcibly sent from Singapore on the "Vyner Brooke" in the early hours of the 13th to 14 February 1942.

The ship was sunk in Banka Strait on Saint Valentine's day after this and the massacre on Banka Island on 16 February we were 32 Australian Army sisters, comprised of 0 to miss training on the sisters, comprised second Street for the kettle to Kevin station, 2nd/10th Street in general hospital on the 13th strange in hospital. To Queen Alexandra Royal Army nursing sisters (to which we are affiliated), three or four nurses of the million souls service, a number of missionaries, one nursing and one teaching order of nuns and some hundreds of civilian women and children. The main originally with us were taken to another camp, after the first few weeks.

Imagine living with these hundreds in appalling conditions? 21 inches of bed space on bamboo platforms, earth floors, which in the wet season were very muddy, no bedding, clothing, money, no soap, very little food and disgusting primitive toilet facilities. At first a trench, later holes dug in the compound, these of course overflowed when the rains came. Maggots, worms and filth overflowed. We had coconut shells on the end of long bamboos to empty as much as possible; to keep the level down.

The surrounding areas very slippery and I wooden trompers were the only footwear. The straps, mostly made of old rubber tyres were always breaking. We had no cooking utensils, except the few tins we scrounged from rubbish heaps and later the latex cups from the rubber trees. Very green firewood, it wouldn't burn and we spent hours fanning it. The coconut shell and bamboo were extremely useful as utensils of all kinds.

Food was the main topic, we talked about food, dreamed food, never had enough. 2 grammes of dry polished rice a day. In the early days our rice was mouldy and had to be picked over until all the mouldy grains were discarded - a daunting task. We

also had limed rice, which no matter how much we watched it, was yellow and revolting.

Sweet potatoes were often kept by the guards until bad, so we lost a good deal of the ration.

We never had enough food, a few green beans and kangkong (a kind of Spinach) but never enough.

What little meat we had in the early days was thrown on the roadway. Ration division was a nightmare.

Soon we were suffering from diarrhoea, dysentery, Dengue fever, malaria, severe malnutrition caused beriberi and other deficiency diseases. We also had typhoid.

No medicines after the first few months when what the nuns had were exhausted. Sometime later Red Cross parcels arrived, but we were not given them. The Japs kept the chocolate and cigarettes etc., medicines were never distributed. If we asked for some or anything else often we would be made to stand in the sun, slapped about the face or "bashed" no other word for it, by rifle butt. This sort of treatment went on for all of the time of internment.

Our so-called hospital was a farce, the girls were devoted and did all they could, but mostly, especially in 1944 - 45, only rest and hot water could be given. No salt or sugar for dysentery cases. The deaths mounted. No coffins, sometimes a few boxes could be knocked together. We had to carry the bodies about a mile from the camp on two bamboos. The graves could only be shallow, no decent shovels, only chunkels to use.

When our strength gave out towards the end, we dug the holes early in the morning, as by late afternoon we wouldn't have the strength to do it. In the early days a few deaths occurred but towards the end I have known there to be 20 deaths in a day. All had to be buried before nightfall. Infection was rife. It was sordid to say the least.

Nora Chambers, one of our civilian women had crosses made and burnt with a hot wire name and date on each one.

A service was held by the missionaries but all this had to be shortened in the end. Life was really terrible.

Some people simply gave up and if one did death resulted shortly. I couldn't bear the thought of dying under those conditions, one's body doesn't really mean much, but the thought, I'm sure kept me going.

We sisters kept our uniforms, they were oil stained and incomplete. We wore them when the Japanese officers officially entered the camp to emphasise our officer status, and we wore them when released.

In the early part of 1942, we sisters were regarded as a target for the Japanese brothels. Rape was held over our heads, 27 of us went in uniform to the "so-called" Jap club. (We were ordered to do this, with many threats). We had no shoes, hair cut very short, no make-up, we must've looked a daunting lot of scarecrows. It

is too long a story to tell here but prayers, defiance and determination saved us. Officially we had no more trouble but the trauma of that affected some of us for a long time. I could go on for hours telling you the horrors and degradation. Unless you have been a POW you have no conception of the humiliation, degradation and brutality suffered.

I know that the caring comradeship of our little "families" consisting of perhaps six or so friends, were our salvation. We looked after each other when sick, shared the heavy work, pooled of the few cents we earned from the Dutch ladies, and therefore could buy a few cents worth of chilies, spices perhaps an egg, banana or pineapple. The Dutch were very good to us, without them we would have had no clothing or money. We did their chores and they paid us. I made hats from grass matting used to bring our rations into the camps, I also altered mattresses for the Dutch when they couldn't carry the large ones. We were moved a number of times, each camp being worse than the previous one.

Many deaths occurred. We just couldn't take it. Often days at a time in the hold of a ship or others on the deck in the blazing sun, or in enclosed cattle trucks. Yesterday had gone, tomorrow may never come so we had to make the best of each day and do the best we could - we might be dead by nightfall.

We had a lot of fun, the British sense of humour I would not be stifled and after all we are descended from that hardy stock. We had singing whenever possible, a piano in one place, where we were in the early days. A few very good voices in camp. We gave concerts and the Jap officers invited themselves and had cane chairs to sit on, we the earth. One Dutch lady sang "Land of Hope and Glory", her W's were V's. We laughed and clapped and made her sing the chorus over and over again. The Japanese sense of humour wasn't sufficient to see we were taking the "Mickey" out of them.

By the time 1945 came no one had much energy. Schooling had been given the children but even this was "slowed down" as was much else.

Some of my saddest memories are the ones concerning the people and especially our eight sisters who died in 1945. All the suffering of the previous 3 years and then to die. Recently I went to Kranji war cemetery in Singapore, and I found the names of our sisters, who have no known graves, on the marble arches. I thought of them as I knew them, young and beautiful, and of all the love, laughter and courage. All I have now except the love that is there is by the relatives and friends who knew them, is a name on a piece of marble.

The eight sisters who died in 1945, four in Muntok, Banka Island and in the War Graves cemetery in Jakarta.

I being the only surviving sister of my unit, have no one who worked with me in the good days.

The bond though that is between all POWs is marvellous and I enjoy our reunions very much.

We learned to play contract bridge and Mah Jong, cards and tiles were made by us. We had talks on many subjects by different people. Church services every Sunday and the "Captives' Hymn", words and music by Miss Drybrugh was always our ending to the service.

Yesterday the band played it and I couldn't believe my ears at first, it nearly made me weep.

When we were released by `plane to Singapore, the staff, some of whom had been sent away in 1942 on the "Empire Star", almost killed us with kindness, as did our families when we arrived home. We missed our friends in camp, our families couldn't see through our eyes of thing as we did. We had to pick up our lives again. Many made entirely new and different ones. I married back in malaya, and had three children and went through the emergency. My husband was also a POW, he had been on the railroad in Thailand, so perhaps it wasn't so hard for me. POWs days taught me many things.

To help one's country in the time of need something very precious, come what may.

Looking back, I think of all the sisters who didn't come home. I think of them as young and beautiful, not growing old, but eternally young! Tis them I think of particularly when we see the "Ode"

"They shall grow not old, as we who are left grow old", etc.

I would like to close with the epitaph on the Kohima memorial which says:  
"When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today."

Ellen Mavis Allgrove (nee Captain EM Hannah)  
2/4th Casualty Clearing Station  
2/AIF 1940 to 1946 POW 1942 to 1945 Sumatra

My family and friends call me "Nell".

My Army and Nursing friends call me "Mavis".