

## MISS HIGGS IS STILL MARVELLOUSLY CALM

THESE days her hair is snowy and she lives a quiet life in a charming little retirement flat at Coolbellup, 11 miles south of Perth.

But Eileen Higgs is still the "marvellously calm" woman that Vladimir Tretchikoff describes in his book.

She conveys the feeling that nothing would daunt her. And her eyes . . . does "Tretchie" remember her eyes? They're almost aqua blue and as bright as stars behind her glasses.

Early in 1942 when she and the artist met in a lifeboat after Japanese shells had sunk the small Chinese coastal vessel *Giang Bee*, bearing them and some 300 other refugees from beleaguered Singapore, Eileen Higgs was in her 30s.

Only months before, in August, 1941, she had arrived in Kuala Lumpur as general secretary of the YWCA there. (In 1920 she was a foundation member of the Perth branch, after training as a schoolteacher, and she is now a life member.)

In her dry way, she says, "There was no doubt about my timing!" Kuala Lumpur fell to the Japanese in December, 1941.

Vladimir Tretchikoff (whom they all called "Tretchie") was then, she guesses, in his late 20s. He had been the cartoonist on the "Straits Times" and was

keen to get to South Africa

where his wife and baby daughter were waiting for him.

Also in the lifeboat was a second YWCA official, Leila Bridgman, a New Zealander who had been Singapore general secretary for the previous seven months. The two women stayed together through the hardships of their subsequent imprisonment. Miss Bridgman now lives in Auckland, but they keep in close touch.

The *Giang Bee* went down in the darkness of Friday the 13th (February, 1942), and on Sunday the lifeboat party of 42 men, women, and children (four lifeboats were launched but only two were ever accounted for) made landfall on the coast of Sumatra.

Eileen Higgs had already begun her diary.

She said, "I found a pencil in my handbag and I wrote on the wrappings off the biscuits, which were part of the lifeboat rations."

Later, in the prison camp, she copied the day-by-day account of their tortuous passage to Java into a school exercise-book and there it was — the ink faded and smudged — a chronicle of desperate days and a tangible testimony of the indomitable spirit of Eileen Higgs.

It was a typewritten copy of this diary that she sent to Tretchikoff in 1971 to help in the writing of his life story, "Pigeon's Luck."



*Eileen Higgs: "I managed to get enough paper to keep my diary going."*

Miss Higgs had not heard direct from Tretchie for 29 years — although she'd noted his rise in the art world — until he traced her in 1971, but she remembers him as well as he remembers her.

She said, "When we landed on the beach at Sumatra he started to stand out as a leader. He was a real Peter Pan. He wanted his own way — however, he was nearly always right. While some of the men took the boat along the coast to try to get help, Tretchie stayed with us."

"He could speak Malay and, remember, he had a trained eye. Both those things came in handy then and later. He was able to find out, from Malay fishermen who came by,

where to find water and to bargain for food.



where to find water and to bargain for food.

"While we were waiting, the British minesweeper Tapir — which was already overloaded — took off 18 of our members in exchange for some of their's, who volunteered to join us.

"The lifeboat achieved nothing but contact with more fishermen and, after a week on the beach, we decided to set out again.

"A bit further along the coast, most of those who'd lived in Malaya got off at a fishing hut. They were going to try to infiltrate. The rest of us — 15 men, Leila, and me — carried on.

"That's when Tretchie really proved himself. The lifeboat had a sail, but we were often becalmed. He would watch — all hours of the day and night. None of us could sleep much. It might be 3 a.m. Suddenly he'd cry, 'Tide's with us' — it was always that — and then the men would begin to row.

"When we came to a kampong — or village — Tretchie would climb up (the huts are built on stilts right out over the water) to get food for us. Leila and I were the only ones with any Malay money so for that reason we were in charge of the rations.

"I managed to get enough biscuit paper to keep my diary going.

"One day Tretchie did a caricature of one of the other men. But he snatched it and threw it overboard.

"Day after day we followed the coastline. Round every point there seemed to be another endless

seemed to be another endless stretch. We saw planes overhead — dogfights — but we were never fired on.

"On the 14th day we arrived at the southern tip of Sumatra. Then we knew we had to try to cross the Sunda Straits to Java. It was a nightmare crossing and we were lucky to make it.

"The straits are notorious for treacherous tides and currents. For every few yards the men rowed for 12 hours until it was pitch dark.

"We could hear breakers and dropped anchor. With the first light of dawn we could see we were inches from the edge of a reef.

"On the 15th day, as we neared the coast of Java, someone yelled, 'Look at the Dutch navy,' but, of course, it was the Japanese.

"We landed near a lighthouse, divided the remaining food, and followed the railway line inland in four groups — Tretchie was in ours. I don't know where we found the strength to walk about eight or ten miles, but you can do anything if you have to.

"We were resting at the side of the road when Japanese trucks passed us. They turned, came back, and arrested us, and the Japanese officer — a very nice, educated man, who spoke good English — apologised because he had to tie up Leila and me.

"But all he did was loop our left wrists with a slack rope. And when they gave us water, he sent for his own glass for Leila and me to drink from.

"I've always been con-

THINK FROM.

"I've always been convinced you can't generalise about any nation. There are good and bad in all of them. While we were prisoners we encountered many very kindly Japanese particularly those who were Christians.

"Even the Japanese corporal, that first day, when we were taken to the internment centre at the picture theatre in Serang.

"He looked at Leila and me and asked how old we were. Leila was over 50 and I added a bit and said I was 40. He said, 'I think you'd be more comfortable in the jail.' So he got us moved, and it was true.

"Tretchie was in a cell near us but we heard no more of him after we were transferred to the camp in Batavia, where we stayed till our release in 1945.

"They were long, weary years but one of the things that kept us going — hungry though we were — was the thought that the prisoners in Europe were cold as well as hungry.

"At least we were never cold. And we could see the Southern Cross in the sky. Home didn't seem far away after all."

— PAT PARKER