

SELAMAT PAGI
THE BANGKA ISLAND NEWSLETTER
<https://muntokpeacemuseum.org>



EDITION 3
SEPTEMBER 2024



Interior of Newly Refurbished Muntok Peace Museum

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September 2024

If there be righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.

If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.

If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.

When there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

In April 2016, **Judy Balcombe** wrote a report for "Apa Khabar" the newsletter of the Malayan Volunteers Group [MVG], about the new Muntok Memorial Museum and Park in which she said, "Currently, the new Muntok Peace Museum at **Kampung Menjelang**, the site of the Women's Camp, is nearing completion. A low semi-circular wall, a replica of that in the original Town Cemetery, and gates will mark the entrance to the (small) Memorial Park in front of the Museum. The land for the Museum and Park has been donated by the people of **Kampung Menjelang** and the building work has been undertaken with donations from former internees, their families, Australian Nurses' families, the MVG and BACSA (British Association for Cemeteries South Asia)." Over the last 9 years the Museum has withstood the tropical rain storms and humidity which are customary on Bangka Island, but late last year it was discovered that the roof was leaking causing damage to the internal paintwork. We are very pleased to report that the repairs to the Peace Museum in Muntok have now been completed. The roof has been replaced to make the building waterproof, and the walls have been painted white inside and out. The whole building looks very smart. When the original exhibits have been returned to the building and a few new ones added, the Museum can be opened once again. It has been an expensive repair and we have **Judy Balcombe** to thank for liaising with **Mr. Fakhrizal**, Director of the Timah Museum, to arrange the necessary building works, and for raising the funds to cover the cost. With some financial assistance from the Malayan Volunteers Group [MVG], and the Nurses' families, **Judy** has raised the money herself by holding garage sales, with the help of **Arlene Bennett**, former President of the Australian Nurses' Memorial Centre in Melbourne. She deserves a huge vote of thanks for her work to keep this important Memorial in good repair. [See **Judy's report on Ps. 15-16**].

Our thanks also go to **Michael Pether** for his permission to use his interesting and comprehensive account "Bangka Island. A Broad Perspective" about what happened on Bangka Island during the last days of February 1942 following the Fall of Singapore, and why it happened.

We are also indebted to **Michael** for his extensive and detailed research into the passenger lists of the evacuation ships, both large and small, which were sunk or captured by the Japanese off Bangka Island. The ships and their passenger lists and can be viewed on the Peace Museum's website. The lists will also be recorded in the next edition of this newsletter.

Michael's article about the Women's camp at Bangkinang on the mainland of Sumatra, was first printed in the MVG's "Apa Khabar" newsletter in July 2014 – over 10 years ago now. It seems appropriate to give this contrasting account of life in the women's camp to that of life in the men's camp, as described in **Arie Kuijl's** account. Thanks to **Michael** for his permission to print this again. We thank **Arlene Bennett** for her fascinating article about **Dame Margot Turner** – the English Nursing Sister who survived all the odds on a raft for four days after her ship was sunk.

[See **Ps.17-19**]

An Apology and Correction.

I offer a huge apology for spelling "Selamat Pagi" incorrectly in the two previous editions of this newsletter. I am grateful that it was pointed out to me.

Articles for future editions.

We would be very grateful to receive articles for the newsletter. Please send to:

rosemaryfell11@gmail.com

THE FRANK BREWER ORAL HISTORY TAPES

With thanks to the Imperial War Museum for permission to use these tapes

Continued from Tape 2

Going back to the Police Barracks camp there is one story I ought to tell, it really was so funny: the very first night we settled into the barracks one of the officers in my room, remember we were all lying on the floor shoulder to shoulder, brightened up and said, "I think perhaps we've got nothing to celebrate and we should do something about this." Then out of his kit bag he produced a new bottle of whisky. How he got that past the guard I don't know, but there it was. Little tots were passed around and one or two people from the next room were called in and we all had a tot. And that bottle of whisky lasted for days. It really improved the atmosphere for days. A bit of camaraderie. Just a silly story but something that stuck.

There was another problem we faced. Remember, we had very little food for days. Nothing like a ration which was suitable for heavy duty work. We'd been eating this dried grain rice, chewing it. We had managed to filch a little when doing the working parties along the jetty. The odd tins – tins of Japanese dried salted fish – this was a rare thing.

A delicate problem: "We don't understand it. We are quite unable to get our bowels to function." It must have been a week before we were able to make contact with one of the British doctors in Tinwinning. I went to him. He said: "Don't worry. Two things, I think, one, you've got so little food in you and are using it up, and two, the shock of this transition has put things out of gear. It will all come right." And it did within 10 days or so.

We did hear a few stories when we made contact with people in Tinwinning. There were more and more prisoners, civilians or service people being brought in, in dribbles. These were people from shipwrecks further down the island. Some of these were in pretty poor shape when they were brought in and some had horrid stories to tell.

There was the story of the Australian nurses' massacre which was reported in the War Crimes Trial. These nurses were on the *Vyner Brooke* which was put out of action. Parties of the crew and passengers decide to make for shore to see what they could forage. They happened to run into a Japanese patrol ... the Japanese separated the men and women. They took the men away behind a boulder some way away and they were machine gunned and then they came back to the nurses and told them to stand facing the sea, standing in the water and they were machine gunned. One survived and got into Tinwinning Camp. **[Editor: We now know the ship was sunk, and what really happened to the nurses – the survivor being Vivian Bullwinkel.]**

It was thought desirable that only a limited number of people should know about this atrocity in case the Japanese should decide at some stage that witnesses be removed, in case in the future things went against them, and so there was a ban on talking about this story, and yet I gathered after the war that this story was known in Singapore and Borneo Camps, and some other camps – quite possibly because of movement of POWs... Anyway, she did survive the war.

Another story in Bangka which I learnt about in Palembang: there was a ship called the *Li Wo*, a merchant ship, it had been a Yangtze river ship, then it was commissioned as an Auxiliary Naval Vessel. It left Singapore on Friday 13th. There were a number of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* sailors, petty officers etc. and others packed up in this small ship of 700-800 tons. When they were bombed by Japanese aircraft, heavily strafed on the first and second day, had a lot of damage done to them, finding it difficult to keep going – when they also got into this Bangka Strait area they ran into the Japanese fleet going in to take Bangka. They got into a naval engagement which was quite extraordinary. Although the ship was only just underway and all spare people were down trying to keep the engines going, they managed to fire one shell at pretty near point blank range, and managed to sink or disable a Japanese merchant ship. The Captain **[Editor: Captain Thomas Wilkinson later posthumously awarded a VC]** an old China Captain, said, "Get every bit of steam up you can and ram the next one." Those who were still able jumped overboard including **Ronald Stanton**, the 1st Officer of the ship and became a great friend of mine. He went overboard. He saw the Captain and said, "Aren't you coming?" And he said, "No" and I believe he took his Bible and said, "This is my day. I'm going down" and he went down with his ship. **Stanton** was in the sea. Oddly enough, he never leant to swim till the Japanese War started or just before. He got lessons in Singapore.

A Japanese transport was passing and machine gunned them. He got his scalp ripped open, flapping

about, but managed to keep going. He was more or less in the water for 24 hours...

Tape 3.

He did find a raft occasionally and try to get on it with a few others and get off it and swim again. Anyway he was going in the right direction towards Bangka Island and then came across an RAF Rescue launch with two or three RAF other ranks aboard ... they were trying to get away from the Japs and really didn't know where they were going, so he joined them and discussed with them and had a rest. Some of them said, "We really don't think we can get much further. We're running out of juice. We don't know where to go. We think we'll go up to Bangka and if we're picked up, we're picked up." He said, "Well, I know I'm not going that way having seen what's going on up there," and with one or two others he jumped overboard again and swam ashore. They made their way through the mangrove and into the thicket and eventually met up with others – servicemen – they joined forces, and found an empty hut. They decided to make that a hideout. They would send out a party of 2 or 3 down to the beach to look for any tins or cans of food washed ashore. This went on for a day or two. **Stanton** and one of the chaps were on duty and when they got back to the hut their friends were all dead. They'd all been slaughtered. Apparently they must have been asleep and surprised. Cuts to bits. A horrid shock for them, so they made off in another direction. After 11 to 13 days adrift, running out of strength, too little food, **Stanton's** head wound healing up, but they were in very poor condition. They found a road and ran into a Japanese lorry patrol and fortunately for them they were picked up and taken into Muntok. I was so intrigued with this story because I couldn't think, other than the Japanese committing more atrocities, how these men had been killed but apparently they met with another small party including an MRNVR officer, ex-planter, youngish chap, who had his story to tell: they had been caught by Chinese, rather roughly tied up and dragged about and they had been dragged along the main road and handed over. The Japanese paid money for the handing over of people like that. So they were lucky. It must have been the Chinese who disposed of the other lot. I couldn't believe the Chinese would do this to Europeans. The Chinese, of all people, were the ones most anti-Japanese.

Much later at Palembang, I met a young Dutch Officer in the Dutch Army who, like me, had been in the civil service Ministry in Bangka at the time. I told him the story and said I was extremely puzzled by it. He said, "Well, I'm not. Quite frankly, I think this is the explanation: There were a number of Chinese in gaol before the Japanese arrived. These were people who were on indentured labour systems from the south of China. They came to do the tin mining work on Bangka Island. Under the Dutch immigration laws they could come for a specified period of time then would have to be repatriated. Now, as the Japanese-Chinese War developed, the south coast of China was closed and blockaded. According to my Dutch friend there came a time when they could not repatriate the labour. So after a time they became illegal immigrants and were detained in Gaol. "I think these were the people who were amongst those released from the Civil Gaol in Muntok. They had no local ties with Chinese on the island. They had no means of subsistence when they were released by the Japanese. They must have been extremely angry about their treatment. And a lot of them would have faded away into the jungle type country and quite possibly taken revenge on any white people they came across." That's what was told to me. There's a sort of logic to it.

Bangka was the scene of a whole number of atrocities in those days. The Japanese didn't want prisoners. They were front line troops engaged in operations and we were all rather a nuisance to them. I suppose it was our good fortune that we were taken into a centre straight away, not flotsam and jetsam on the beaches like so many others – we were able to survive.

On the evening of February 27th in the Barracks Camp we were told in the morning to parade with our baggage and marched down to the jetty dock because we were being moved. Some others joined us – a party of over 200 was mustered there. We had a sort of meal. And then a Japanese interpreter got up on a soapbox and addressed us. He said that we were being moved as they hadn't proper facilities. We were being sent to Palembang, a large town, a Dutch East Indies oil centre. There would be suitable accommodation and it was their business to look after us. So we all felt extremely relieved. The two weeks on Bangka Island had not been at all funny. A great deal of depression. So we boarded this vessel. It was quite small and carrying vehicles and weapons.

We were packed on the open decks. Before we set off down came one of those enormous tropical storms. There was no cover. We were absolutely saturated. A night aboard then we sailed in the

morning. We dried out. It was a fairly long trip to cross the Strait, about 25 miles to the mouth of the Moesi River and then about 45 miles upriver to Palembang which is a river port. We arrived there, disembarked and we were marched up through the streets of Palembang. The town and the area around had about 100,000 people. We marched up the main streets. This was quite a revelation to us. As we were marching and halting, the streets seemed to be lined with people: Indonesians, Chinese and Eurasians. We thought at first the Japanese had got them along the streets there to give us a bad time as the broken down British Colonialists. But not at all. It was a most friendly reception all the way along the road. You've got to bear in mind that one of the Japanese big pieces of propaganda in waging this war in South East Asia was to develop the Co-Prosperity sphere ... Not much sign of that from the people in Palembang who hurled cigarette cartons and packets at us, little rolls of bread, bananas, fruit, tins of stuff. We had to catch them. This drove the few Japanese guards who were with us frantic but they were quite unable to stop it. We went on a couple of miles into the town and stopped at a building frontage along the main street. A Chinese Primary School – **Hua Chiao** – it means Overseas Chinese Primary School. In we went into this 2 storey building: about 14 classrooms, concrete floors downstairs, wooden floors upstairs. Two of the smaller rooms assigned to the Japanese: a guard room and an office. Half of another room became a sick bay. Eleven and a half rooms were for the 200 odd prisoners. A tight squeeze. Upstairs there was one flush toilet, squat type and a basin and a shower in a separate cubicle. Downstairs were three or four concrete urinals and a couple of squat latrines. Opposite the entrance to the road an open shed with a roof and concrete base. By the shed at the back of the school was a piece of open ground – obviously the playground as it was quite small. At first sight, it was a great improvement, particularly for those from the Gaol. Arrival was also made very pleasant by a lorry appearing outside the entrance gate arriving with British prisoners and an officer with kerosene tins of food for us, cooked, hot with some meat in it and vegetable soup. We were able to exchange a few words. "We've got another camp further out of town. It seems to be bigger than what you've got and more modern." Not a Chinese but a Dutch type school. Army, Navy, Air Force personnel all mixed up. A senior officer there was **Air Commodore Modin**. They'd been instructed to prepare this food for us. It was the first good meal we'd had since capture. Then once we'd got in, the officers were put into two rooms. There were enough officers to fill two classrooms. A Japanese came and said, "Choose a number of people to operate the cook house." We called for Volunteers – they didn't have to go out on working parties – 6-8 people with an NCO. Very few people had the least idea of how to cook the sort of food we were given. Rice and hard green vegetable. We were allowed to have a Rations Officer. Not called an officer by the Japanese. A rations man. Other than that no administration by us at all. The officers were not recognised. They had no status at all.

They brought in bags of rice. They said they would bring in pork, great sides of pork, the next day. A quantity of sugar which we were able to break up into oxo sized cubes – a ration for each chap ... Tea: again, a communal brewing of tea but we were able to give out little portions of tea. A little bit of salt which went into the galley. At that stage the rationing of rice per man was about 500 grams. A cup full of soup. If you were lucky some pork fat or lean in it. Again, far from enough to maintain chaps working very hard in the sun for 6 to 8 hours a day.

At this stage, most of the officers were not from units to which the men belonged – they were unattached. Only a few of the Officers had their own men with them. A lot of the officers were Volunteers, like myself, from Malaya and not regular officers. The men were Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a few, the Ordnance Corps, Recce Corps, bits and pieces who had been on ships and got picked up.... The most difficult part of this relationship was on the Army side with few officers having any personal connection with their men. At this stage, there were about 26 officers to the 200 men. Not bad but not working as units. Officers did coolie labour as a group but not with the men. This posed a problem with trying to create unity, camaraderie and there wasn't time.

Quite understandably some of the troops who felt let down by being prisoners were saying, "Well, nobody is doing anything for us. What are the officers for? Can't you stop us getting beaten up? Can't you get us food and medicine?" Terribly difficult to get an understanding when there was this problem among some of them.

[To be continued in December.]

PRISONER ON THE EQUATOR

(Opgeborgen bij de Evenaar)

By Arie Kuijl

With acknowledgement from Gareth Owen to Mr. and Mrs. Kindermans for their help in explaining certain colloquial expressions and to Professor Ernst Kotze for help with translating the Dutch text.

By kind permission of the publishers, Jumbo-Offset, Goes, Netherlands. Slightly abridged and translated from the Dutch.

Chapter 4. To the Jungle Camp in Bangkinang continued.

Minor but unpleasant incidents.

The toilets in Bangkinang consisted of a number of closets (*hokjes*), some of them with zinc plates intended to be used as urinals. Every morning queues formed in front of them, each man waiting impatiently for his turn. Sometimes people would use other closets and an Englishman was one day caught doing this and was hauled before the magistrate the same day. Through an interpreter the magistrate asked him why he had committed the offence. The Englishman had a fine excuse. For years, he said, he had suffered from something wrong with his bladder and had consulted the Institute of Tropical Diseases on the matter. His condition obliged him to relieve himself as soon as possible and therefore he couldn't wait in a queue. The magistrate ordered him to appear on the next day with a doctor's certificate.

Next day we all waited with interest to see what would happen. Exactly at the appointed time the Englishman appeared with the certificate in his hand. His story was totally invented and the doctor had treated the matter as a joke and had given him a letter. He reckoned that matter was too unimportant to spend much time on. The magistrate, to his chagrin, had to dismiss the man with a warning.

Soon, however, everybody thought they could go to the doctor and get a certificate to exempt them from punishment so something had to be done. A boy who had pelted another boy with stones was sentenced by the magistrate to a few days work on a wall. His father complained that this work was far too strenuous for a boy so the magistrate ordered him to be examined by a doctor and given an official declaration. The doctor, now realising he could not issue certificates at variance with the truth, found the boy perfectly capable of the work.

Macho types with the right of veto.

The Resident and the Camp Leader (he always styled himself "Resident Camp Leader") was something of a dictator. He always had the last word and demanded that only he should have contact with the Japanese. Setting up a committee thus didn't make much sense because whenever it made a decision, the Camp Leader simply vetoed it. If the committee then resigned, the Camp Leader promptly set up another one consisting of an assistant camp leader and inspectors.

The Camp Leader remained at first in the background but one day took centre stage, saying that the responsibility of the internees lay on his shoulders and that after the war he would have to answer to the Dutch government for his actions. But our camp lawyers claimed he did not have this right and treated him as if he was just another internee. Protests had no effect – he remained. But for most of us it wasn't worth bothering about. Committee or no committee, life went on.

One day, the magistrate resigned, convinced of the futility of his work whereupon the Camp Leader immediately appointed somebody else. Sanctions in the camp were much more effective in maintaining discipline than the Dutch government.

The Tiger who would not go into the pot.

The camp police were extremely officious and many of us did not agree with the sentences handed down by the magistrate. Offenders were sometimes locked into a dark cellar and food denied them, in the circumstances a shocking practice.

"We'll get our own back," they said, "Our time will come."

But it was actually quite difficult to find a fitting punishment for the offence. Even so, depriving men of food should never have happened. We all had need of as much food as

we could get and everything that was edible was eaten, irrespective of whatever it tasted like. Main thing, it filled the stomach.

Cases of prussic acid poisoning would occur mainly due to eating rubber seeds. One day the Japanese brought a tiger carcass to us and enquired whether we could skin it and return the skin to them. It was then suggested we boil the flesh as this was too good a chance to miss, even though the animal stank, having been shot 24 hours earlier. The doctor was summoned to examine the meat. After carefully cutting, examining and smelling it, he decided to his great regret that it was unfit for human consumption so it was buried. It was very sad, the only chance we got to taste meat – and it turned out to be rotten!

Anything for a little protein.

One day, the Japanese brought us some iguanas which were slaughtered, cooked and served up as a great dish – iguana soup. But not everybody rejoiced at such events. Some remained quite choosy about what they ate and only later during internment were they forced to descend to the level of the rest of us and ate anything. They talked about “unclean flesh” and “carrion eaters” and tempers flared. Most of us were glad to get some meat and were disappointed that it was so little. The general rule was that you ate whatever was provided. Opinions were divided about the taste of the iguana meat – some said it was like chicken, others like horse. But there is, of course, no accounting for taste. At other times the Japanese brought us wild pigs that had been shot which we then washed, scraped and cut up and quite often we sent various cuts and occasionally a whole pig to the women’s camp. Some of the women were perfectly capable of slaughtering pigs. Whenever a pig was brought into the camp, cries of joy erupted at the prospect of eating pork, although one pig did not go far among a thousand men. Later the Japanese stopped bringing us anything at all. They said they were now only going to shoot two-legged pigs, by which they meant Americans.

How the Japanese provided us with “meat.”

The only parts of buffalos we got were those which in normal times would have been thrown away – intestines, stomach, heads without tongues etc. It was an appalling state of affairs especially as we were in an area which swarmed with pigs. We asked the Japanese to allow a few of us out of the camp but they refused saying that ammunition they had could be used for better things than guarding prisoners. They also said that everybody was hungry, even outside in the villages so we had simply to tighten our belts. Sometimes frogs and snakes were smuggled in which were then killed and a fine fatty soup prepared which we all consumed with relish. We even caught rats and ate them. It was even worse in the women’s camp where only the sick were allowed rat meat. The rats were examined by the doctor before being prepared for consumption. We had a sweet little dog in our camp but one morning he was nowhere to be seen. It turned out that some boys had killed and eaten him during the night. They were hauled up before the magistrate and sentenced. He found it a “disgusting deed.”

The women arrive in Bangkinang.

A few months after our arrival in Bangkinang, a start was made to bring the women and children from Padang to Bangkinang. Their camp was only a few hundred metres from ours and consisted of a number of huts with atap roofs. They had very little space but often they were able to install themselves quite comfortably and mothers with children could almost create a little “home” for themselves.

A friar accompanied one of the transports and as he had been with the women all along, he was well informed about their living conditions and had been responsible for their welfare. Now the Japanese put him in charge of a number of orphans and transferred him and them to our camp. He proved to be a mine of information about the women’s camp and the ordeal they had been through.

After we left Padang prison, the Japanese transferred all women and children there. It was an appalling experience for them because there were not enough toilets; there had been a shortage even for the 1,000 or so of us men. But there were 2,300 of them and how they put up with the humiliation and hardship remained a mystery to us. The friar was pumped for information because he knew almost everybody and didn’t want to disappoint anybody so that he hardly got any rest from morning to late at night.

The orphans were put under the care of the pastor. For a while they were accommodated in the dairy and were well looked after and fed. Then they were suddenly removed and hundreds of cows were left to their fate. The Japanese looked after them but later we heard that most of the cows had perished.

We are deprived of our views.

During the first months we were able to sit and watch the monkeys playing in the trees nearby. We could look through holes in the fence and had a good view of the padi fields. But it didn't last long. One day the Japanese repaired the fence and we were deprived of our views.

Medical aid under appalling conditions.

There were a few doctors in the camp but they couldn't do anything because there were no medical supplies. The same was true for the whole of the East Indies; degrading and humiliating treatment. The captors took the greatest pleasure in hitting, kicking and punishing us. If we had resisted, we would have been shot.

We had one excellent surgeon in the camp who rendered invaluable service and who deserves the highest recognition. He was able to operate successfully in extremely difficult conditions, a truly brave and persistent man. By chance, a woman doctor from Medan had brought some surgical instruments into the women's camp and the surgeon was able to use them to carry out some successful operations on appendix removal and bladder disorders among others. But patients took a long time to recover because there were simply no special foods, at the most a piece of meat. Milk and eggs were not available.

The surgeon dealt with emergency cases, despite the risks involved. A little room abandoned by the Japanese served as an "operating theatre." It was swept clean because the chance of infection was very high and very probably fatal in those circumstances. There was initially no operating table but one was soon produced in the camp workshop.

Whenever the doctors attended the women in their camp, they were always assured of a hearty welcome. They would meet their wives and children, find out about their state of health and bring back information to us in our camp. We also had a pharmacist in the camp who had a good knowledge of local herbs. We could expect absolutely nothing from the Japanese so we had to fend for ourselves. Permission was sought for the pharmacist and a few doctors to leave the camp once or twice a week to look for herbs in the jungle. Fortunately, this was granted so it was possible to prepare a few pills and medicines for the sick but they were of limited use. Anybody who had recovered from one bout of malaria could be sure that he would have a relapse during the following three weeks. They would be given more pills but never enough. If the internment had lasted just another three months, half the men in the camp would have died – of that every doctor was convinced.

Everybody lost weight and became thin. Wounds were almost certainly liable to become infected and sometimes tropical ulcers took six months or more to heal. Pellagra*, large red spots on the body, beri-beri, hunger oedema were frequent and we had no medicine to treat them. All the symptoms of under-nourishment were visible everywhere. Many people died in hospital and we could do nothing to help them. Only boiled rice with a few green vegetables and a few lumps of meat could be provided – not exactly nourishing fare. The supply of bandages soon ran out and one had to make do as best one could with rags which were constantly re-used with consequences one can easily imagine. In the middle of the camp there grew a rubber tree which produced an ideal adhesive latex. At first people tapped the tree at random, but it was soon realised that this would have been fatal for the tree so access to it was controlled and every morning one person tapped the tree and the resulting latex was made available to all comers who use it to secure their dressings. This tree served us right to the end of our internment, for without it our plight would have been worse. Who would have thought that a single tree could have become so valuable!

***Charles Samuels**, a lawyer from Penang, died of pellagra in camp in 1944. His diary of the first few months of internment is now in the Rhodes House library, Oxford.

[**Editor:** His diary was serialised in editions 48 - 50 of "Apa Khabar", MVG's newsletter.]

Divisions into four health categories.

The doctors decided to divide everybody in the camp into four health categories in order to obtain an oversight of the prevailing health conditions. We all had to stand in line to be examined before being allocated to one of four groups, A, B, C or D. Those in Group A were the weakest and most in need of help. They formed the Skeleton Team and had priority for leftovers which helped them a little. Cleaning the cooking pots was the job of the boys and they formed themselves into licking and scouring teams. They took it in turns to lick and scour and the pots came back spotlessly clean.

Achieving the golden mean when doling out the food.

Doling out the food was a major business and was one of the most thankless tasks in the camp. The trick was to give everybody an equal share and leave as little as possible over – no easy task with 1000 men needing to be fed three times a day. A special measuring jar had been cobbled together and anybody who thought he wasn't getting his fair share could use this jar to decide. If you reckoned you'd been short-changed you went to the kitchen to complain. At first everybody used a medley of pots and pans but we soon introduced standard-sized spoons and plates to avoid disputes. But still there were complaints; the food hadn't been stirred sufficiently or there were too many leftovers – there was always something to complain about.

Those who doled out the food were appointed on a permanent basis and as a result cases of favouritism began to be noticed which had to be dealt with. Sometimes one noticed dozens of men standing in line in front of one of the pots but none in front of the other. They were then reminded that food was doled out at both pots.

Hunger caused many to try and get two helpings despite strict controls to prevent it but it still happened and offenders were sent to the camp magistrate who ordered them to be denied food as well as those implicated.

Rumours concerning re-uniting families.

Rumours began to circulate that the Japanese were going to reunite families by interning them together and plans were supposed to be at an advanced stage. It was even thought the Japanese had given orders to build a new shed to accommodate them. Our 'administration' set to work and started to form groups on the basis of families with a view to helping the Japanese as soon as they gave the order. Hopes were high that families would soon be reunited. But some went to the administration and asked if they could remain bachelors.

"For God's sake, don't put me with that hag of a wife again!"

Fortunately these were exceptions. But, of course, nothing ever came of the proposed plan.

Amazing things you can do with hoop irons.

When we first arrived in the camp we came across a large number of hoop irons which had previously been used to bundle sheets of rubber together. Soon they were made into iron baskets, boxes and toys and other useful things. A toothbrush factory was set up because toothbrushes were unobtainable outside and every time a wild pig was brought into the camp, its bristles were carefully preserved to make more toothbrushes.

Removal of rubber supplies.

One day, the Japanese took away large amounts of rubber in the camp. We had used these piles of rubber to throw lice on to so that they were crawling with the filthy creatures and now at a stroke we were free of them. Or so we thought. But they were still there in abundance. Many of us went outside in the midday sun to try and rid our clothes of them instead of having an afternoon nap. At least they had a slight chance of sleeping at night.

Introduction of a work schedule.

In our Padang prison we had hundreds of coconuts at our disposal every day. They were added to our vegetables so that we had some vegetable fat in our diet. The meat was grated and some of it baked so that we could sprinkle it over our rice. But in Bangkinang we seldom or never had coconuts. They did not grow in our gardens and the Japanese never bothered to supply us with any. But whenever we did get some, they were made into all sorts of useful things such as ashtrays and mugs and an Englishman even made a splendid teapot!

[To be concluded in December.]

BANGKA ISLAND "A BROAD PERSPECTIVE"

Researched and written by Michael Pether
Updated in February 2023 and printed by kind permission of the author.

The reason that the many terrible events which occurred on Bangka Island (east of Sumatra) and in the seas around that island in February 1942 have not been forgotten is almost entirely due to the untiring efforts and huge perseverance of a small group of the relatives of both the 21 Australian Army Nursing Service Sisters (who had been shipwrecked after the sinking of the 'SS Vyner Brook' and landed on 'Radji Beach' only to be murdered by Japanese troops on 16 February 1942) and of several civilian internees who died in Muntok interment camp.

The world's historical memory, of several thousands of civilian and servicemen who lost their lives on and in the seas around Bangka Island during the month of February 1942 after evacuating Singapore, would otherwise have faded and the actual names and the atrocities they endured would by now be simply notes on yellowing files in the National Archives of Australia, the UK National Archives and their related War Museums.

Most of the men, women and some children who died were British and Australian, with smaller numbers of New Zealanders, Malay naval ratings and Chinese.

The Evacuation of Singapore:

The invasion of Malaya and Singapore, from the time of the first landings in Northern Malaya on 8 December 1941, was swift and brutal. Within eight weeks the Japanese had taken Malaya and landed on the island of Singapore, which had become intensely overcrowded by tens of thousands of fleeing civilians of all races from Malaya plus almost 100,000 servicemen.

By the second week of February 1942 the Japanese army was advancing across Singapore Island and a chaotic evacuation of mainly Europeans, Eurasians and a small number of influential Chinese was underway from the port in front of what is today's CBD.

Literally any ocean-going vessel of any size remaining in Singapore harbour was ultimately enlisted by the authorities to evacuate people, under what had become almost constant bombing and machine gunning by Japanese planes. Singapore itself was ablaze, columns of black smoke rose thousands of feet in the air and the streets were littered with hundreds of dead and dying.

People desperately clamoured for departure passes from the colonial government authorities (men under 40 years of age had been banned from leaving the island for months and women had not been publicly encouraged to leave because it would '...adversely affect morale...!') to board any ship leaving the island.

By 11 January 1942 even the rather hidebound men in authority saw the absurdity of their bureaucratic incompetence and more passes were quickly issued for civilian men and women to leave, so finally some real urgency entered the situation. Military commands also finally faced up to the seriousness of the situation and large groups of the more skilled servicemen were identified to be evacuated at the last minute so their skills could be used in the ongoing war effort.

Of the 100 or so vessels which left Singapore between 11-14 February 1942 carrying evacuees, only about 20 made it to safety. Even after the capitulation of Singapore on 15 February, vessels were still managing to leave the island, possibly raising the total to between 140 and 150. The vessels included: tugboats, praus, sampans, junks, merchant ships, naval vessels etc. Most of the casualties resulted from Japanese aerial bombardment and strafing and shelling from Japanese naval vessels which was inflicted on the motley flotilla of vessels as it sailed down the Bangka Strait towards Java. Accurate shipping departure and passenger records were not kept in the chaos of boarding, and no-one knows with certainty how many passengers were there, but it is thought that between 4 to 5 thousand people lost their lives on the eighty or so ships that were bombed and sank or were captured.

The Naval vessels, apart from a couple of destroyers, which briefly escorted the bigger merchant

ships like the 'SS Empire Star' and 'SS Gorgon' to safety after leaving Singapore, included Auxiliary (i.e. merchant ships which had been requisitioned) Patrol ships, Auxiliary Minesweepers, flat bottomed ex-Yangste river gunboats and ex-Yangste river passenger ships, Royal Navy 'Fairmile' design patrol boats, RAF fast launches and even a large tug like the 'HMS Yin Ping'. Some of these Naval ships had almost exclusively a complement of service personnel on board – but also a few civilians.

Bangka Island:

The history of Bangka Island, a large island situated off the southeast coast of Sumatra, during the 100 years prior to the Second World War was one that evidences typical efficient Dutch administration in the Netherland's East Indies – with a primary focus on Dutch and Chinese owned open cast tin mining using imported Chinese labour to supplement the local labour force.

By 1942 Muntok, the main town on the south coast and on the edge of the Bangka Strait, had developed into a typically tidy, well administrated Dutch outpost which at that time featured an extraordinarily long (600 metres) pier stretching out to sea because of the shallow waters, a solid Customs House still standing on the foreshore, several streets of Chinese shops, a sizeable Cinema (that sometimes appears to have been referred to as the 'Chinese Club', and which basic structure still exists), a prison and a well-known large 186 foot stone lighthouse, built in 1862 but still standing about 3.5 kms (as the crow flies) to the west of Muntok at Tanjong Kelain to guide shipping into the northern channels of the Bangka Strait.

Apart from the other town of note, the capital named Pangkal Pinang on the northeast coast, the island to all intents and purposes comprised – and still comprises – undulating hills with jungle-like vegetation, scarred by the tin mines and with small kampongs evident at distances.

Wartime significance of Bangka Island and the Bangka Strait:

Misguided orders given to departing Captains of evacuation ships in Singapore, the loss of naval access in Singapore to coded radio messages from earlier evacuation ships, and the specific location (being on the path of the evacuation flotilla from Singapore and the simultaneous Japanese invasion fleet heading to Sumatra) and the Japanese Naval order that "There will not be another Dunkirk", were all keys to Bangka Island becoming the scene of so much horror in February 1942.

The reasons in more detail were:

- Firstly, almost all (say 50 out of 60 vessels) the evacuation ships from Singapore which left during the week prior to Singapore being surrendered headed towards and through the Bangka Strait as the shortest route to Batavia in Java, because Java was still in Allied hands. A few (say 6 to 8) smaller vessels travelled a shorter distance to the Indragiri River, on the east coast of Sumatra, which was the start of the 'official escape route' across Sumatra to the port of Padang. This escape route had been planned and provisioned by the British Military as early as January 1942. Another couple of smaller vessels headed a little further south and up the Batang Hari River to the town of Djambi.
- The outcome would be that, of the 50-60 vessels which left Singapore during 11-14 February 1942 about 40 or more would be sunk or captured by the Japanese Navy and Air Force. Research is slowly defining these numbers.
- Also putting late pressure on Singapore authorities in early February 1942 to clear as many women from that city, was a new fear that had spread through the City for the safety of all remaining women and the nurses stationed across the hospitals and aid posts on the Island – news of the atrocities inflicted by the 229th Infantry Division of the Japanese Army on the European and Chinese nurses at St. Stephens Hospital in Hong Kong on Xmas Eve 1941 had finally reached Singapore. An urgent order was given to evacuate all remaining nurses, key army personnel and where possible civilian women and children and to clear Singapore Harbour of all remaining ships.
- Contributing to the impending chaos of sunk ships and several thousand deaths that would

result was the awful fact that Royal Navy radio code books – which would have allowed decoding of the warning messages from earlier evacuation ships as to the arrival of Japanese warships in the evacuation route – had been either destroyed or removed prematurely from Singapore by the time these last ships were leaving.

- At the same time someone in command ordered the evacuation ships to travel only by night, and during daylight try and 'hide' amongst the myriad of islands of the Rhio Archipelago – the harsh reality of hindsight is that those Captains who simply ignored those orders and steamed without stopping were the ones whose ships survived because they reached the Bangka Strait before the Japanese Navy. Almost every ship which took shelter was delaying its journey, with the result that they fell into the range of advancing Japanese Navy warships and Japanese bombers.
- Even so, ships leaving Singapore as early as 10/11 February firstly had to contend with aerial bombing and strafing attacks from Japanese bombers as they passed through the islands just south of Singapore, and then through the thousand or more islands of the Rhio Archipelago which extends down the east coast of Sumatra. Many overloaded evacuation vessels such as the 'SS Kuala', the 'HMS Tien Kwang', 'Kung Wo', 'HMS Dragonfly', 'HMS Scorpion', 'HMS Grasshopper' and others were sunk by these bombers with a terrible loss of lives. The range of the Japanese bombers extended over the following week and by 15 February had reached the southern end of the Bangka Strait. The Bangka Strait is the body of water which varies in width from a few miles to ten miles, between Sumatra (particularly the mouth of the Musi/Moesi River) and Bangka Island.
- Then, critically for the events which followed, the Japanese Navy arrived in the more northern waters between Singkep Island and Bangka Island on 13 February as the advance guard of the Japanese invasion army headed for Sumatra.
- In the context of understanding why the ensuing awful events on Bangka Island occurred as they did, it is necessary to understand that almost a month earlier, in fact on 20 January 1942, the 38th Division of the Japanese Army (at that point still stationed in Hong Kong after invading that city in December 1941), and including the men of the same Divisional Headquarters Companies of the 229th Infantry Regiment who had committed terrible atrocities around Xmas Eve 1941 at many places in Hong Kong, moved to Camranh Bay in French Indochina [Vietnam] to prepare for invading southern Sumatra and particularly Palembang. The specifically allocated 'Bangka invasion unit' of the larger 38th Division Invasion Force – being the same two murderous companies of 229th Infantry Regiment plus shipping engineer elements – left Camranh Bay on 12 February 1942 and arrived at Muntok Anchorage at 0100 hrs on 15 February. Their plan was:

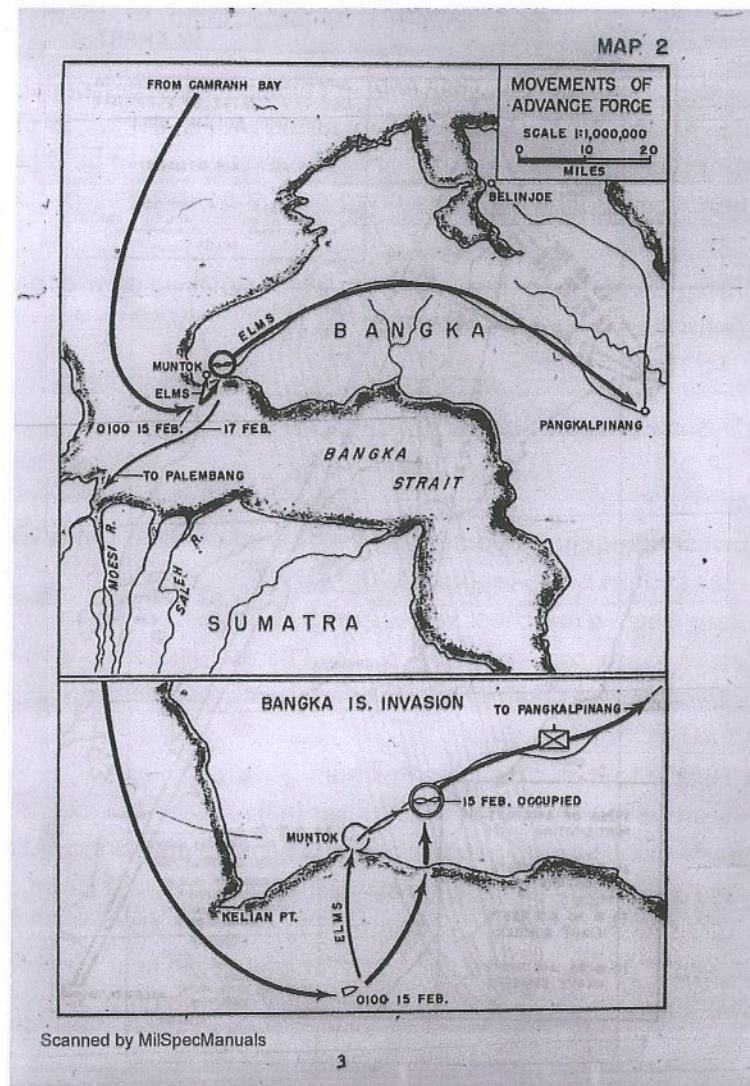
"... one platoon was to land in the vicinity of Muntok Pier, with the main body, composed of one company and two platoons, landing 2,000 metres southeast of Muntok [See Map 2] ... After securing the airfield and its surrounding area, one company which was to remain for occupation was to secure Pangkalpinang. The remaining troops were to rejoin, as rapidly as possible, the main body of the advance force in Sumatra..."

As planned one company of the 229th Infantry Regiment remained to occupy Bangka Island while the other company, on the 17 February, moved across the sea and up the Musi/Moesi River to the Palembang area to join the main body of the invasion force attacking southern Sumatra.

So just after midnight on 14 February 1942, the Bangka Island invasion force – in addition to the powerful fleet of Japanese Navy cruisers, destroyers, frigates and smaller landing craft – had assembled on the west and south coasts of Bangka Island. They had cut off access to the Bangka Strait escape route.

It was into this deadly flotilla that the evacuation ships were headed.

The following map created by the Japanese after the War shows the advance.



THE WOMEN OF PADANG AND BANGKINANG INTERNMENT CAMPS

Prepared by Michael Pether for the Malayan Volunteers Group Newsletter, April 2014

[Sources: Dr. Marjorie Lyon, Sister Marjorie de Malmanche, Mrs. Mavis Lampen-Smith & Shirley Eames]

Among the legendary stories of British women who suffered as internees under Japanese rule in the Dutch East Indies there is one lesser known group who survived bombings, machine guns and sinkings whilst escaping Singapore before reaching the apparent safety of the evacuation port of Padang in western Sumatra – but only to find that they were too late to board an evacuation ship for the safety of Colombo in Ceylon or Fremantle in Western Australia. These are the women of the internment camps of Padang who moved during the war to the Bangkinang Women's Internment Camp in the jungles of northern Sumatra.

There is a story of some 60 British (English, Scots, Welsh, Eurasian, Australian and New Zealand) women and a few children who left Singapore on the 13th February 1942 on ill-fated ships such as the "**SS Kuala**" and "**HMS Grasshopper**" only to be attacked and shipwrecked on small islands in the Indonesian Archipelago (then the Dutch East Indies). They were the 'lucky' survivors of sinkings which took the lives of many hundreds of their companions. They survived days adrift at sea or were stranded on uninhabited islands before making their way by small boats (many of them severely wounded) to the Indragiri River towns on the eastern shores of Sumatra. Their journey took weeks as they struggled to be included on trucks, trains and other vehicles across the mountains of Sumatra on the official escape route towards the port of Padang.

They were in an awful situation "...we were destitute, without any money, without any clothes except for those we stood up in and we were a very emaciated lot after our five days of thirst and starvation..." [Dr. Marjorie Lyon's memoirs]. 12.

They reached Padang from about the 4th March 1942 onwards and waited for rescue ships which never arrived – some 2,000 servicemen and civilian men (plus a few women) had been successfully evacuated in the previous two weeks. By 15th March, the town of Padang was declared an 'open city' to prevent bloodshed and the Japanese Army arrived soon after on the morning of 17th March 1942. Immediately, about 25 women, children and nursing sisters were interned with wounded men at the Salvation Army Hospital in Padang and another 30 women, children and nursing sisters were interned in a little wooden hut in the town (this became known as 'the British Camp'). One ward in the Hospital was full of women wounded in the sinking of the "**SS Kuala**" and several died as the Japanese arrived – two of these being a young school teacher, **Miss Doughty**, and **Mrs. Warre**.

This early experience was not too bad since there was sufficient food and the Hospital was a pleasant situation, but all this changed dramatically on 25th June 1942 when everybody incarcerated in the Hospital, wounded and dying patients and all, were given ten minutes to collect all their possessions and hospital equipment and join 2,500 Dutch women and children in a large internment camp situated in a Roman Catholic complex and school named "Fraterhuis." Whilst "*... the Fraterhuis was dirty, full of school desks and we were not allowed to bring our beds or bedding or instruments or drugs ...*" it had the advantage of "*... a guard at the gate, a 20 foot fence with barbed wire all around and the presence of 2,000 Dutch women was some protection...*" [**Dr. Lyon**].

These women and children soon came under the leadership, and essentially the protection, of a remarkable Australian Surgeon and obstetrician from Singapore by the name of **Dr. Marjorie Lyon**, who, despite being wounded with tummy blast in the bombing of the "**SS Kuala**" showed huge strength of character and the attributes of a born leader. The British women were largely dependent upon the Dutch for food supplies since most had friends and staff on the outside and **Dr. Lyon** was instrumental in food supplies being equitably shared with the very ill, pregnant women (there were some 100 women who were pregnant when they came into camp) and children.

Shirley Eames, a toddler at the time who was interned with her mother recalls, "*... the reluctantly-chivalrous Dr. Lyon was an Australian, who became our official spokesman and overall leader. I can still picture her; small, stocky, roundish face with close cropped dark hair; an Antipodean Boudicca, who was to stand up time after time to the Japs, risking censure to ask for more medicines, even when she was slapped by them for daring to ask...*"

And now the well known treatment of women in Japanese internment camps was just beginning to emerge – long musters at midday in the sun for hours, searches of their quarters and a struggle to maintain any hygiene. During this time, the British women and nurses were begrudged any food provided by the Dutch women, who had largely come into the camps with substantial equipment and money, and were asked to pay for it, despite the internees having no money – **Dr. Lyon** solved this demand by retorting that all medical services provided by her, the British doctor [**Dr. Elsie Crowe**] and 8 nursing sisters would be withdrawn. Problem solved. The nursing team formed at that time became permanent until ultimate liberation – they comprised 3 English nursing Sisters [**K.M. Jenkins, Brenda Macduff & Marjorie de Malmanche**]; 4 Scots [**L.M. Harley, Jean Smith, Lydia McLean & Sarah Service**]; an Australian [**Heather Fisher**] and 1 Sister from Wales [**Naomi Davies** who married Sumatra FEPOW and MVG Hon. Member **John Hedley** after the war].

The camp was very overcrowded and as 1942 progressed the standard of persons in the position of Japanese Camp Commandant deteriorated whilst the rations were cut, ration money reduced from 25 cents a day to 14 cents and the variety and quantity of food brought into the camp dwindled. [**Lyon** and memoirs of **Marjorie de Malmanche**]. By late 1942 "*... a beast of a Japanese Sergeant named Sibuiashi became Commandant ... he also refused us any rice for two months, so that we had to live on sweet potato and another coarse tuber known as ubi kayu ...*" [**Lyon**]. "*... The only fruit was an occasional banana. Diabetics who had no insulin and a completely unsuitable diet, soon died ...*" [**Marjorie de Malmanche**]. "*... Then he (Sibuiashi) took over half the convent buildings from us and crowded us up unbearably. He also tried to make us all bow to the Japanese, and he made several attempts to take young girls out of the camp 'to work for Nippon'. This last we forcibly resisted and 1,000 women turned out to fight for the persons of the chosen girls. The fight was interrupted by the Nipponese Military Police, who declared the girls were not to leave the camp...*" [**Lyon**]. Not surprisingly there was soon an outbreak of Diphtheria which took the life of a six year old boy. "*... Tropical ulcers were very bad, some of them 6 inches across, down to the bone with sinews etc. showing...*" [**Marjorie de Malmanche**].

The small separate "British Camp" in Padang still existed at this point and depended on the

team in the *Fraterhuis* for medical care. Sadly, on one of her visits to the 'British Camp' with its small group of English, Eurasian, one New Zealander and one American internee, **Dr. Lyon** brought back two women suffering from abdominal pain – **Mrs. Connie Curtiss**, wife of **Brigadier Curtiss**, and **Miss MacMillan**, a Matron of a Hospital in Malaya. The latter was found to have inoperable cancer and died in December 1942. **Mrs. Curtiss** soon died of tuberculosis. 1943 arrived and the grind of internment continued for the women – "... *Our food, though uninteresting, was not too bad. Breakfast – a plate of sago flour mixed with boiling water – exactly like wallpaper paste, with a sprinkling of sugar on top. Lunch – boiled rice and vegetables, tea or coffee. We all had a small ration of sugar and salt ... Soap now became unprocurable and a lot of women were using wood ash instead to do their washing...*"

[Marjorie de Malmanche].

A survivor by the name of **Shirley Eames** confirms the malnutrition experienced. "... *When rice was doled out by the Japs, adults received a full tin, half a tin for children. The measurement used was a State Express 555 cigarette tin. Breakfast was a rudimentary congee of tapioca starch, a mass of grey pulp which was referred to as 'blubber pulp.'* 'Hunger' became an everyday cry from children; but whilst food was scarce, there was tea in abundance. Sacks of it ... Japanese dustbins were also a source of extra food. Mum would ransack the bins for old banana skins and egg shells. She'd boil the former, and bake the latter, then crush them into a powder to provide me with calcium. It was whilst she was doing this one day that she realised how low, in her words, she had sunk, reduced to scavenging from bins. By the end of the war she'd lost nearly all her teeth, and her hair was prematurely grey. Thanks to her nutritional foresight I have good teeth and bones..."

In June 1943, the worst earthquake known for 20 years hit Padang. "... *which destroyed lots of houses in the town, engulfed a neighbouring village and caused much loss of life. In our camp one building fell down and one woman died of her injuries. We all hated earthquakes and voted this our worst experience of the war...*" **[Lyon]**. Given what these women endured during the war, it must have been a terrible earthquake!

"... *Then in October 1943, Sibuiashi arrived one day at 2 p.m. and said we were all to be moved at once, with what we could carry. He and his Indonesians drove us out of that camp like a lot of sheep with their rifle butts, along the road for about 2 kilometres to the native jail, which had until that morning housed the 800 Dutch and British men internees...*" **[Lyon]**.

Another view is that from **Marjorie de Malmanche**, "... *In the camp it was chaos. The women could only take what they could carry and the decision of what to leave and what to take at a moment's notice was difficult. Most women with children had iron cots with legs and castors, which they filled with bedding and cooking utensils. Before they were out of the camp the legs of the cots buckled. Others made big bundles and dragged them along. Even the toddlers were loaded up...* **Brenda (MacDuff)** and **Lottie** found a long, thick bamboo pole and threaded it through the handles of all the big kitchen pots and the bedpans, and clanked their way out, each with the end of the pole..." **[Marjorie de Malmanche]**.

"... *The jail was built for 500 native prisoners and we were 2,400 women and children, and our lot was made worse by the presence of a number of sick and old men left behind and by 70 Dutch men political prisoners, who were being treated shamefully for suspected crimes against the Japanese. The jail had one bathroom and about 30 lavatories (consisting of holes with squatting places above them and in full view of all). The real trouble was that the latrines were so congested with faeces that the sewage flowed over from the holes into the camp all the time... We had a bad time with dysentery and diphtheria epidemics at the jail, and most of us had hardly any room to lie down at night. I slept on a verandah with the Sisters and when it rained we just got wet...*" **[Lyon]**.

"... *Early in the morning I woke up to find my hand hanging over the side of the verandah in water. It was pouring with rain. The camp was flooded and masses of sewerage were floating in the water. The sewerage pipes had all been broken in the previous earthquake... There were only 3 taps in the place – one in the Hospital, one in the bathroom and a standpipe in the open – so there were constant queues for water...*" **[Marjorie de Malmanche]**.

Within a few days, a Japanese officer came into the Padang jail camp and told the internees that in a couple of months they would be moved again, "... *to a much nicer place, where there would be no sickness, but food was becoming scarce and we must make do with less...*" **[Marjorie de Malmanche]**.

On 5th December 1943, the move to Bangkinang, 350 miles north from Padang over a mountain range in central Sumatra, began. It was carried out in groups of 500 women and children at a time – firstly on foot taking only what could be carried, then by train to Fort de Kock (the sick patients were dragged up the steps of the train and lay on the floor) and finally by open truck over the mountains in the pouring rain. Most people vomited because of the roughness of the truck journey. Surprisingly, only one woman died. **[To be continued]**.

Repairs to the Muntok Peace Museum. Report by Judy Balcombe

The Muntok Peace Museum on Bangka Island <http://muntokpeacemuseum.org> was built in 2014 with donations from civilian prisoners' families, the Malayan Volunteers' Group and from BACSA (the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia). The Museum was started as a memorial to the British and Australian and New Zealand prisoners who died in Muntok and remain buried in the town, now lying under houses and a petrol station (male prisoners) and in a group grave in the Muntok Catholic Cemetery (Women). The Peace Museum stands next to a primary school at Kampong Menjelang, the area of the former Women's and Children's prison camp.

In the early 1960's, the Indonesian government closed all smaller war cemeteries. At this time, Dutch authorities moved all their military and civilian graves to war cemeteries in Java. By contrast, the British and Australian governments only arranged for their military graves to be moved. Some civilian graves from Muntok were relocated to Java by accident or by employers but the majority of British, Australian and New Zealand civilian graves were not moved. BACSA wrote that this was one of the saddest stories they had heard.

The Muntok Peace Museum was opened in 2015. At the ceremony, a local government official sang to us words from John Lennon's Imagine, which encourages all people to live together in Peace, sharing all the world. Muntok was visited by UNESCO in 2009 and praised as a town where people of many races and religions live together in harmony.

The Muntok Peace Museum now recognizes all who suffered and died in the region during World War 2 – the local people from Bangka Island whose houses were bombed and who suffered great deprivation, the many who lost their lives in the now-estimated over 100 boats carrying evacuees and military personnel from Singapore, those who were killed on landing and the many who suffered in the harsh camps with very high death rates from malaria, dengue fever, dysentery, beri beri and starvation.

The annual Bangka Island Memorial Service is held in Muntok each February 16, the anniversary of the massacre by Japanese soldiers of the 21 Australian Army Nurses, civilians and servicemen on Radji Beach and commences in the Muntok Peace Museum. Families of civilian internees and Nurses attend, together with the Australian Embassy to Indonesia and local dignitaries. The Australian Embassy attends in memory of the Australian Army Nurses and Mr Vivian Bowden, Australia's Official Representative to Singapore (Ambassador) who was murdered by guards outside the Muntok cinema on February 17, 1942

after speaking out in defence of British soldier Frank Brewer. Mr Vivian Bowden is the only Australian diplomat to have been killed in wartime.

The New Zealand and British Embassies are always invited to attend, as is the Netherlands War Graves Foundation to Indonesia. Half of the internees in these prison camps were Dutch – families taken from their homes, the Catholic Bishop of Palembang, Muntok's Catholic priest, Catholic nursing nuns and brothers and government officials.

In April 2024, an inaugural ANZAC Day Service was held in Muntok, attended by the Australian Embassy to Indonesia and retired members from DELTA Coy 5/7 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment. The group visited the Muntok Peace Museum.

During the February Service this year, it was found that the roof had leaked badly following heavy seasonal rain, causing flooding and significant water damage to walls. Fortunately the many exhibits were spared damage. It was found that major repairs were needed and we undertook fundraising to carry out this work. I am very please to advise that the work has been completed, with a new roof installed and painting of the inside and outside of the building. Thank you very much to the MVG and individuals who contributed to make these repairs possible.

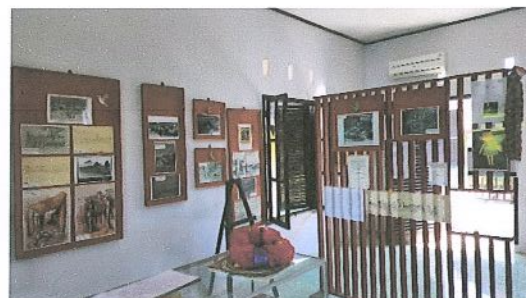
It is now planned to install further display cabinets and I would like to invite anyone who may like to send small items or copies of documents or photos that they may wish to add to the collection to contact me or Mrs Rosemary Fell.

The Peace Museum aims to tell the story of the War years and to remind people of the harm that wars cause, in the hope that we may all be inspired to work towards a more peaceful world.

Thank you very much,

Judy Balcombe, Melbourne

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DAME MARGO TURNER – by Arlene Bennett

In 2022 I had the honour of visiting the National Arboretum. It was a place of commemoration and remembrance for all those who had gone off to war and for those who had perished. It was a day that I will always remember.

I was privileged to visit the FEPOW Hut which was a very moving experience for me. So many people had been involved in the Far Eastern theatre of war. So many stories of imprisonment, starvation, illness, death and then the people who survived three and a half years of captivity. Very much the story of the sixty-five Australian Army Nursing Service nurses who had left Singapore in February 1942.

As I looked around the FEPOW Hut at all of the exhibits I noticed a photograph of Vivian Bullwinkel. Vivian had been the sole female survivor of the Bangka Island massacre. She is very important in the Australian context and I wondered why her photograph would be there and none of the British Nurses who had also been prisoners of war were nowhere to be seen. I found this to be somewhat disconcerting.

This saddened me when I thought of the British nurses who had been prisoners of War in the Far East. Malayan Volunteers Group historian Michael Pether writes that 170 British Nurses left Singapore on the *Kuala*, of whom 130 died in the bombing off Pom Pong Island. A number of these nurses, including members of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, became Prisoners of War in Padang and Bangkinang in Sumatra. Forty Military and civilian British were imprisoned with the Australian Army Nurses on Bangka Island in Palembang and at the last camp at Belalau at Lubuk Linggau.

One British nurse in particular, was Margot Turner, later Dame Margot Turner. She was a member of the Q.A.I.M.N.S.

Her story is one of survival and resilience and it is a story which we must not forget.

Margot Turner left Singapore on the 13th of February 1942 on the *SS KUALA* with up to 170 other nurses. Some were Q.A.I.M.N.S nurses and others were nurses who had been in Malaya and Singapore prior to their evacuation.

The *KUALA* travelled along but it was bombed near Pom Pong Island. The ship sank. Many people made it to the island and they were there for three days. The nurses cared for the sick and injured. A small ship called the *TANJONG PENANG* put in at the island and between 250-300 women and children were loaded aboard plus wounded men and survivors from other shipwrecks in the area. Margot was one of the nurses who joined the *TANJONG PENANG* to care for the injured.

On the 17th of February the *TANJONG PENANG* was bombed catastrophically. So many people died at the time of the bombing. Margot was on a raft with other people but in the end she was the only one to survive on the raft.

In her biography *THE WILL TO LIVE* by Sir John Smyth she is quoted as saying the following,

"It was at this moment that I became acutely conscious of the will to live. I was determined that I would hold onto life as long as it was humanly possible. I prayed that help would come and felt definitely that some unseen power was watching over me. Why me, and not those who had drifted away? I managed to collect a few drops of rain-water in the lid of my powder compact and also ate some seaweed which floated near the raft. Night came and I watched the stars and soaked up the rain that beat down on me. I thought of home and my family and the happy things in my life."

A Japanese ship came close to her and picked her up on the fourth day afloat. She was taken to Muntok on Bangka Island. A small island off the coast of Sumatra. Her state of weakness was evident and some allied soldiers wanted to carry her off the ship but the, English speaking, ship's doctor carried her off. She was taken to the Coolie Lines where there were many other nurses also imprisoned as well as survivors from the many other ships including the thirty-two AANS nurses. From there she was transported to Palembang, Sumatra. Her life was to change dramatically once she was in Palembang.

Margot and three other nurses were asked by a Japanese officer if they would work in a native hospital. They agreed to do so. On the 6th of April 1943 they were advised that they should report to the Japanese offices but they were met by the KempeiTai (military police). After questioning they were allowed to return to the hospital but this was to be a short reprieve.

The following day, whilst at the hospital, they were asked by a Japanese doctor if they wanted to continue working at the hospital or to return to the camp. They opted to go back to the camp. At the appointed time they were collected and taken to the Palembang prison. Two nurses per cell. They remained in the prison for the next six months. They were in prison with murders and thieves who on many occasions slipped bananas or cake into their cells. They were allowed out of their cells for a short period of time each day. Eventually all four of the nurses were put into the one cell which was good for their morale. They never really knew why they were imprisoned but they were released after six months and returned to the camp.

Margot's life in the camp continued on in Muntok and finally they were returned to Palembang and were transferred by train to Belalau near Lubuk Linggau. So many of the women died in these camps. They died of starvation and many of the subsequent diseases. Those who survived did so in varying states of disease and malnutrition.

Finally, on the 24th of August, Captain Seiki announced the end of the war.

Margot Turner returned to Singapore with her colleagues. She then set sail for England on the 26th of September arriving in Liverpool on the 24th of October 1945. She was home again after three and a half years as a POW. Following a six-week period of leave she went back to her work with the Q.A.I.M.N.S. She worked in theatre and then had several postings in places such as Malta, Libya, Cyprus, Egypt, Eritrea, , Hamburg, Bermuda, India, and Hong

Kong with various ranks. She had returned home and rose through the ranks of the Q.A.R.A.N.C and she would eventually become the Matron-in-Chief of the Q.A.R.A.N.C and Director of the Army Nursing Service in 1964.

She was awarded the Royal Red Cross Medal, an MBE and later on she became a Dame of the British Empire. Dame Margot Turner was a truly remarkable woman. She had endured so much and continued to lead with strength and humility.

In 1978 there was an episode of THIS IS YOUR LIFE which honoured Dame Margot Turner. Many of her fellow POW's appeared and paid tribute to her as did so many others.

Dame Margot Turner and Betty Jeffrey met up with Sister Katerina in Palembang in 1979. All were former POW's They recalled their camp experiences with Lavinia Warner who produced the documentary called WOMEN IN CAPTIVITY. Lavinia later produced TENKO which was a dramatisation of the women in the POW camps.

On my recent trip to the UK I was fortunate enough to visit Keogh Barracks in Mytchett, Aldershot, Surrey. I researched Dame Margot Turner's life and was left somewhat overwhelmed when I saw the powder compact that she had used to collect water in order to save her life on the raft in 1942. The museum is certainly a great place to visit.

Judy Balcombe and I travel to Muntok in Indonesia to commemorate the nurses who were POW's and those who died there and on Sumatra. We join the relatives of the Australian nurses who attend. The Australian Embassy is well represented. The New Zealand Embassy and the Netherlands Military Attaché attend also. In recent years the British Embassy has not attended but we hope that they will return soon to honour the nurses and other British who lost their lives on Bangka Island. It is a very moving occasion and we always welcome anyone who would like to attend.

It involves several moving services of Commemoration on the 16th of February.

I hope that the experiences of British nurses during World War II will be remembered.

Lest we forget.

