

SELAMAT PAGI

THE BANGKA ISLAND NEWSLETTER

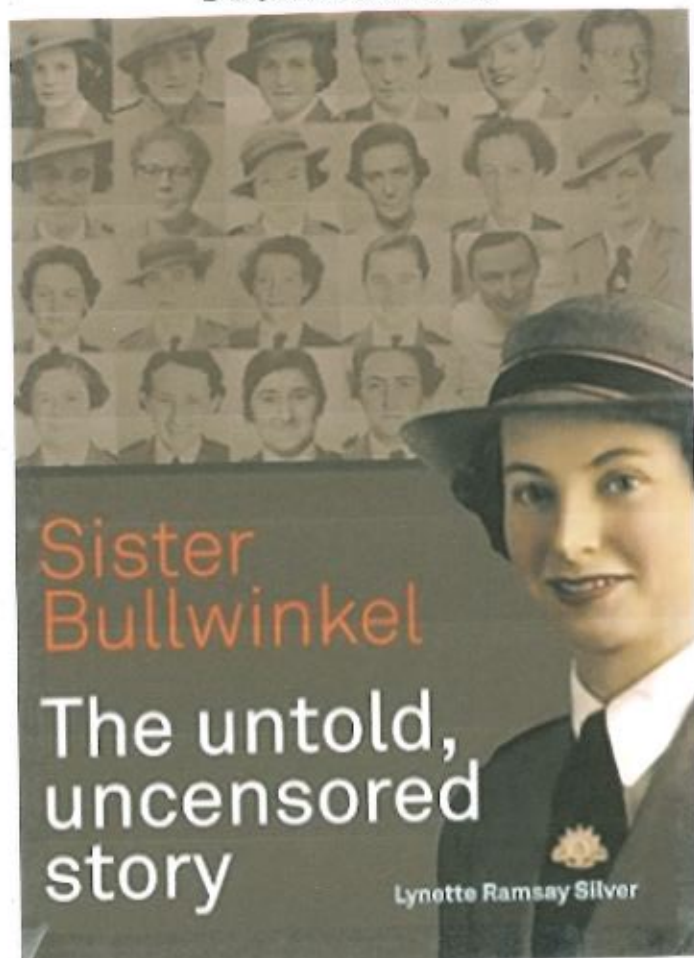
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Singapore Far East Moon Rose

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"Sister Bullwinkle. The untold, uncensored story."
The front cover of Lynette Ramsay Silver's new book.

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December 2025

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.

A very old Chinese Proverb

END OF WORLD WAR II

History records that World War II ended on 15th August 1945 following Emperor Hirohito's announcement of Japan's unconditional surrender. However, the **Instrument of Surrender** was not signed until 2nd September 1945, on the US Battleship **USS Missouri** in Tokyo Bay. It was signed on board the Battleship at 9.04 a.m. by **Mamoru Shigemitsu**, Japan's Foreign Minister, and **General Yoshijiro Umezu**, Japan's Army Chief of Staff, on behalf of the Empire of Japan, and by **General Douglas MacArthur**, Supreme Commander for the Allied Forces South East Pacific, on behalf of the Allied Nations. Other signatories followed by representatives of the Allied Nations. Interestingly, the Surrender Document was brought to Washington DC on 6th September 1945 and on 7th it was presented to **President Harry Truman** before being exhibited at the National Archives. It was formally received into the Archives on 1st October 1945.

But it was not until 12th September that the Japanese surrender took place in Singapore on the steps of the Municipal Buildings (now known as City Hall) opposite the Padang. **Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten**, Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia took the surrender, attended by **Admiral Sir Arthur Power**, **General Sir William Slim** and **Lieutenant General Raymond Wheeler**. After accepting the Japanese surrender, **Admiral Mountbatten** read the order of the day to the parade of Allied Service Personnel on the Padang. Also in attendance was **Lt. George Booker 2/FMSVF** father of MVG members **Jane Booker Neilsen** and her late sister **Merilyn Hywel-Jones**.

KRANJI - 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF WORLD WAR II COMMEMORATION

The Commemoration Service to mark the 80th Anniversary of the signing of the Japanese surrender in Singapore on 12th September 1945, was held on that date in September this year at Kranji War Memorial. The organising committee for this event was chaired by **Jeya Ayadurai MBE** from The Singapore History Consultants. The Committee included representatives from the British High Commission and other High Commissions from Commonwealth Countries; representatives from the Japanese Embassy; and representatives from several Singaporean organisations (including the National Archives of Singapore).

The beautifully presented Service Booklet includes information about the Kranji War Memorial and Stone of Remembrance as well as thoughtful opening remarks about the purpose of the Ceremony and the spirit of reconciliation between the wartime nations. It seems an appropriate time to remind ourselves why we need to remember this annual day of Commemoration, and how important it is to teach future generations about the sacrifices made by those who fought to defend their country.

The following information, under 3 headings, is taken from the Commemoration Booklet.

We thank and acknowledge **The Singapore History Consultants** who have given permission for us to quote from their Service Booklet.

Commemoration Ceremony

80th Anniversary of End of World War II

12 September 2025

The strife of war came to an end in Singapore on 12 September 1945. This year marks its 80th anniversary, a solemn milestone in our nation's history.

Today, we gather to remember the trials endured, the sacrifices made, and the lives lost during one of the darkest chapters of our past. We honour the bravery of those who stood together in defence – the Allied forces, including the British, Australian, Indian, New Zealand, Canadian and local Volunteer Units. They all fought valiantly during the war.

We also remember the great suffering endured by the Japanese people and the many who paid the ultimate sacrifice in defence of their homeland.

We commemorate not to relive the bitterness of those times, but to remind ourselves of the resilience of our forbears who persevered through hardship and laid the foundation for the peace and prosperity we enjoy today.

Remembrance allows us to also recognise all those who wear a uniform to protect and defend their nations and homage to the veterans who are present today.

May this day of remembrance inspire us to honour their legacy, uphold the lessons of history and continue building a future of peace and unity for generations to come.

Lest We Forget

Kranji War Memorial

Built and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Kranji War Memorial is the final resting place of about 4,500 Allied military personnel. These men and women lost their lives in the operational theatre of South East Asia Command (SEAC) during World War II, and in post-WW II conflicts such as Konfrontasi and the Vietnam War. The cemetery also honours, on the walls of the Singapore Memorial, more than 24,000 war dead whose remains were never found. Before the Japanese invasion, Kranji was the site of an ammunition depot. After Singapore fell, the Imperial Japanese Army established a prisoner-of-war camp here.

The camp eventually became a POW military hospital. The prisoners started a small cemetery, and after the war, it was decided to develop it into the permanent and main war cemetery for WW II. Thus, the graves of war dead from other cemeteries in Singapore, such as those at Changi, were also relocated to Kranji.

To search for a particular name or grave, there is a Register available at the Singapore Memorial.

You can also search online at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website: www.cwgc.org

The Stone of Remembrance

The Stone of Remembrance is situated at the entrance of the Kranji War Memorial and is a permanent memorial commemorating the war dead. It was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, a renowned British architect who also designed the original Cenotaph at Whitehall, London.

The Stone of Remembrance is a common feature in Commonwealth War Cemeteries and it acts as a focal point for people of faiths (or none).

Inscribed on both sides of the stone is a verse chosen by Rudyard Kipling, **"THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE."** It is an inscription that not only recognises, but also cements into history, the noble contributions of the war dead.

We are delighted to report that MVG's Membership Secretary, **Roger Willbourn**, attended the Kranji Commemoration and laid a wreath on behalf of the Malayan Volunteer Forces.

[See Roger Willbourn's report on Ps. 6 & 7].

Also at the ceremony were **Judy Balcombe** and **Arlene Bennett** from Australia, and they laid wreaths on behalf of the Muntok Red Cross and the Muntok Peace Museum.

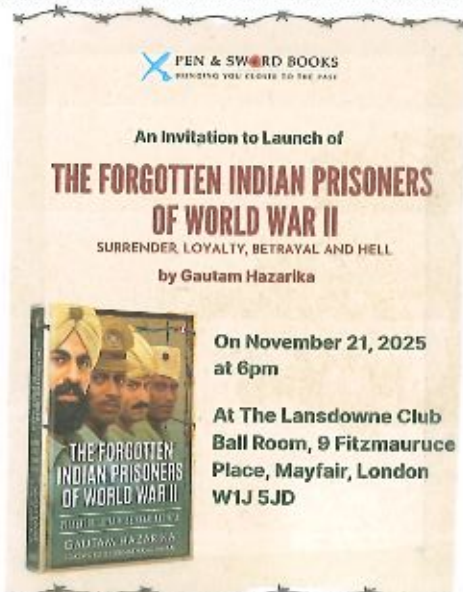
[See Judy Balcombe's report on Ps. 9 & 10].

LONDON BOOK LAUNCH OF "THE FORGOTTEN INDIAN PRISONERS OF WORLD WAR II. Surrender, Loyalty, Betrayal and Hell." By Gautam Hazarika.

It was a great honour to be invited to launch **Gautam Hazarika's** book on 21st November at the Lansdowne Club's beautifully ornate Ball Room in Mayfair. It was a most interesting evening with **Gautam** and his family. Following the launch, **Phil Craig** the London based broadcaster, journalist and author of, *"The Reckoning War, Empire and The Struggle for a New World,"* interviewed the author before conducting a 'fireside chat' with family members of the POWs mentioned in the book. He discussed with them what the soldiers had told their families about their war, and how this had affected not only their post war lives but also the impact it had had on the families, and how this memory has lived through generations in the families.

Author **Gautam Hazarika** is based in Singapore. He is a former banker and now writes on little-known aspects of World War II in Southeast Asia, especially the Indian Army, anti-Japanese resistance, and war crimes trials. He regularly presents at museums in Singapore and WWII conferences and is on a book tour across India, Singapore and London, involving the family members of Indian POWs. Since its launch on 30th September, his book has featured in the Times of India, other newspapers and on TV. This is his first book. [See P.13].

[Note: **Gautam's** book was reviewed by **Jonathan Moffatt** in **Apa Khabar** Edition 84 Ps.25 & 26.]



LYNETTE RAMSAY SILVER'S BOOK

We are delighted to report that **Lynette Ramsay Silver** has written a new book about **Vivian Bullwinkel**, entitled *"Sister Bullwinkel. The untold, uncensored story."* **Lynette's** inimitable research has enabled her to uncover the true story of what really happened on Radji Beach. The war crimes perpetrated on the Australian Army Nurses on Radji Beach were carried out by the same Japanese soldiers, led by **Captain Orita Masaru**, who carried out such horrific crimes in Hong Kong, particularly against nurses. This is **Vivian Bullwinkel's** third biography, but it now covers information which was suppressed during the War Crimes Trials in Tokyo. The book is available online in the UK, and from **Gazelle Book Services**. [See Book Section PS. 11 & 12 for details & review.] We can also report that **Judy Balcombe** has been in touch with **Lynette** about her charitable foundation in Borneo, which may help **Judy** with her plans to set up something along similar lines in Muntok. **Judy** sent the following information:

"**Lynette** regularly visits Sandakan and takes families there, or places tributes in memory of loved ones on behalf of people who can't travel there. She also has a charitable foundation in Borneo. The **Friends of Bangka Island** are discussing something similar so we will have a permanent connection with Muntok into the future. The **Weary Dunlop Foundation** has donated \$21,000 to the Muntok Red Cross. At present it is being looked after by **David (Balcombe)** in the Australian Nurses' Memorial Centre finances (they received a donation of \$50,000 for their scholarships) while the Muntok Red Cross prepare a proposal as to how they will use the donation.

A Perspective on V-J80 – the 80th Anniversary of V-J Day

Enduring memories of an important day,
recorded by Ruth Rollitt on 16th August 2015.

With many thanks for her permission to include these memories.

*[Editor: Ruth Rollitt (nee Iversen) was evacuated from Singapore on 6th February 1942 with her parents, in a convoy of 7 ships. Their ship, the **Plancius**, was the only ship in the convoy to arrive safely in Batavia, the other 6 having been sunk by Japanese bombers. They left Tjilatjap for Melbourne where they stayed for the duration of the war.]*

It was a good, but very emotional day at the National Memorial Arboretum yesterday. I met up with old friends who all know what happened. So many people here do not realise how dreadfully badly the poor young men were treated, who were called up to do their duty and suffered so much – or do they know that civilians – women and children – also suffered? It was a very long day – the weather was good and not as unbearably hot as it had been recently. The train journey was long (longer than flying from London to Inverness!). But the taxi I had booked in advance was waiting for me at the station and drove me safely to the National Memorial Arboretum where I met my friends from the Malayan Volunteers Group and went to the Chapel for the Service. All the men were wearing their or their father's or grandfather's medals and I learnt that when wearing parents' medals they wear them on the right and not on the left. Various people read extracts from stories and diaries written by prisoners and one of them even read from a "First Letter Home after Liberation" by his father. It was all very emotional.

The Arboretum had been decorated beautifully and the King and Queen were at another ceremony which we could also attend – but most of us from the Malayan Volunteers Group just came to ours as it would have involved a very early start to get there in time for the main ceremony which was televised and I saw it when I eventually got home in the evening.

One of the poems read:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.
We will remember them.

And the FEPOW Prayer (Far East Prisoners)
And we who are left grow old with the years,
Remembering the heartache, the pain and the tears,
Hoping and praying that never again
Man will sink to such sorrow and shame.
The price that was paid, we will always remember
Every day, every month, not just in November.
We shall remember them.

And the Kohima Epitaph
"When you go home, tell them of us and say
For your tomorrow, we gave our today."

After the service we walked down to the MVG's Plot and laid a wreath before a kind person drove me back to the station, where I caught the train to London and eventually got home at 8 p.m. after a long, very emotional day, but it was worth every minute!

I am sure I do not need to tell you why it is so important for me to have been there for V-J Day. At the age of 3, my parents, Per (my brother) and I had to leave home in Ipoh, Malaya with just one suitcase per person and drove to Singapore from where we went on ship in a convoy of 7 to Australia just a week before Singapore fell.

Our ship was the only one that was not torpedoed! I do not naturally remember it, but I have it from my mother's memories that I have used in my book (**"Iversen. Architect of Ipoh and Modern Malaya."**)

I have watched all the programmes that have been on TV recently, and felt sad for the Japanese who were forced to behave in the way they did. The young university students who were encouraged by the Emperor to be good citizens and become Kamikaze pilots and kill themselves by flying their planes into ships at sea and what they considered enemy targets. All these programmes were horrid, especially the ones about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When living in Japan we went to the Atomic Dome at Hiroshima and I was horrified when reading, **"When the Americans attacked Pearl Harbour, Japan was hurtled into the Second World War!"** And then – Philip's last job was Consul General at the British Embassy in Japan. You might have thought that the Foreign Office would have looked up on my file that I had had this experience and might not have been too keen on us going there – but no – typical FCO – they did not care about wives so off we went. My poor old mother died of shock as she knew she would never, ever want to visit us there and worried about me – and off we went.

And then – four years in Japan!! I travelled a lot and fell in love with the beautiful country and made many wonderful friends – and realised that ordinary people knew nothing about the atrocities – and here in London I belong to a British/Japanese Society called the Otomodachi-Kai. I have been on their committee for years and now just enjoy all the wonderful things they put on. They keep me going and I love it.

[Ruth Rollitt].

BANGKA STRAIT

A Poem by Keith Shegog

Recited at the annual Bangka Day Memorial Service in Adelaide,
and read at the 83rd Commemoration Service on 16th February 2025, in Muntok,
by Captain John Kennedy RAN, Head of Australian Defence Force Nursing.

February fourteen, Bangka Strait, nineteen forty two.
This day we remember the chosen few,
A sinking ship, a prayer to Him,
Survivors face a ten mile swim.

Australian Nurses, serving with the A.G.H.
Rally together, thought bodies do ache.
Helping the others, they make for shore.
For those that stayed, they could do no more
Through the night, no reason to rejoice.
On reaching the shore there is little choice
Surrender, what else can be done
None would imagine the massacre to come.

Twenty two nurses marched into the sea.
Sounds of gunfire, a prayer to Thee.
One survived the final test
Twenty one more find eternal rest.

So remember, those the good Lord took
Their journey began with the sinking of the *"The Vyner Brooke."*

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KRANJI — 12th September 2025

Roger Willbourn

As we are all well aware, 2025 is a most significant year for all those whose families and ancestral relatives were affected by the Pacific War and in particular by the brief Malaya - Singapore campaign of Dec 1941 to Feb 1942. Having missed the important 75th Anniversary Victory commemorations in 2020, owing to the covid restrictions, my wife, Caroline, and I were determined to be present for the 80th Anniversary event and so we flew to Singapore for the week from 9th to 15th September 2025.

Also representing the MVG in Singapore was Judy Balcombe, author of the 2023 book 'The Evacuation of Singapore to the Prison Camps of Sumatra' and the primary driving force behind the creation of the Muntok Peace Museum (www.muntokpeacemuseum.org). Judy was accompanied by Arlene Bennett of the Australian Nurses' Memorial Centre, who flew up with her from Melbourne.

Our MVG Hon. Member and very good friend to all those of us who visit Singapore, Mr Jeya Ayadurai MBE, had been involved for months in planning the ceremony, in his capacity as chairman of the committee for the Commemoration of the end of World War II in Singapore. Whilst VJ Day itself was on 15th August 1945, it took many weeks for the various Allied Forces to reach the disparate theatres of war and the hundreds of PoW and Civilian Internee camps scattered around S E Asia and the Far East. So, the official surrender ceremony in Singapore eventually took place on 12th September 1945, when the Japanese General Itagaki formally surrendered to Lord Louis Mountbatten at the central Municipal Building on the Padang, later renamed City Hall, and which is today the National Gallery of Singapore.

The 12th September Commemoration ceremony in 2025 was held, as in previous years, at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery out at Kranji, on the northern edge of Singapore island. As many members will know, this is beautifully laid out on a low hill and its upper slopes, with some 4,500 individual graves and a further 24,000+ names of those who died in the S E Asia and Pacific campaigns, but who have no known grave, marked on the walls and panels of the imposing central structure.

After a day of incessant torrential rain on the 11th, the 12th September dawned bright and relatively clear. Fortunately, this pertained throughout the day and when we all gathered at Kranji around 4:00 pm, there was a slight, welcome breeze on the hill and only thin high cloud. There were some nine representatives of the various 'officially recognised' religions

present and I can only assume they had all been praying hard, as not a drop of rain fell, in stark contrast to the previous day. Under Jeya's efficient chairmanship, the committee had managed to assemble an impressive representation of the Great and the Good, including High Commissioners and Defence Attachés from Great Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India and Malaysia, as well as diplomatic and military dignitaries from Singapore and the USA. The Japanese Ambassador was also present, since much of the emphasis these days is on reconciliation as well as Remembrance.

The Guest of Honour duly arrived at 4:30 pm. This was Lieut-Gen (Ret) Winston Choo, who had been the first and longest-serving Chief of the Singapore Defence Forces. In his speech, I was delighted to hear him actually name-check the Malayan Volunteers Group -- no doubt this had been carefully implanted into his speech by Jeya ! The ceremony, which took around an hour or so to complete, had been superbly choreographed by Jeya and his team. It was anchored by formal military order, with a catafalque party comprised of the Singapore National Cadet Corps and sailors from the RN patrol vessel HMS Spey, which happened to be based in Singapore at that time. Included in the service were a number of readings, prayers, the laying of wreaths, buglers playing the Last Post and, of course, a reverential and contemplative two minutes silence. We were also fortunate to have present a small orchestra and the Girls' Choir from CHIJ St Nicholas School, who sang and played to a high standard at the appropriate times before, during and after the service.

It was all beautifully arranged and one was proud and pleased to have been present. Towards the end of the ceremony, the various diplomats laid their wreaths and I was able to lay a wreath on behalf of the MVG. Judy and Arlene also laid wreaths, Judy's to honour the memory of those civilians who died in the internment camps and Arlene's to honour the Australian Army Nurses from the *SS Vyner Brooke*. Jeya had arranged for us all to sit in prominent positions in the VIP areas and we are all very grateful to him and his staff at Singapore History Consultants for the superbly efficient arrangements and the outstanding manner in which the Service was conducted by his colleagues.

We made some useful contacts there, including the head of the CWGC for the Americas & Pacific, Mr David Loveridge (who is based in Canada). No doubt he will be an important contact for Colin Hygate in his efforts to create a Memorial in Labuan for the Volunteers who were massacred on that island at the end of the war. It was a very special day for all those present and a most suitable commemoration of both the end of the war in S E Asia and of those who suffered and died during the four years of that conflict.

A very well edited short 'highlights' video of the ceremony has been made by Jeya's company and can be viewed here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEFuNpf8Hiw>

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**Commemoration of the 80th Anniversary of the end of WW II
at Kranji War Memorial – 12th September 2025
Roger Willbourn lays the wreath in memory of the Malayan Volunteer Forces,
together with ex-Serviceman Steve Ward.
With thanks to the Singapore History Consultants for these photographs.**



**Judy Balcombe and Arlene Bennett lay wreaths to commemorate
The Muntok Red Cross and the Muntok Peace Museum**



Visit to Singapore, September 2025

The second world war ended with Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945 but Singapore remained under Japanese occupation until September 12. Last month I flew to Singapore with Ms Arlene Bennett, past president of the Australian Nurses' Memorial Centre, for the memorial service at Kranj War cemetery on September 12, to remember 80 years from the end of Japanese occupation.

Kranji Cemetery is cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and holds the graves of nearly 4,500 Allied military personnel who died during World War 2. More than 850 of the graves are 'known only to God'.

The Singapore Memorial behind the rows of headstones contains the names of over 24,000 personnel who died in South East Asia during World War 2. This memorial is a tribute to the air force, navy and army, comprising the wings of a plane, the fin of a submarine and columns representing rows of soldiers standing to attention.

The day before the memorial service we met with Roger Wilbourn, the membership secretary of the Malayan Volunteers Group and his wife Caroline for lunch at the Singapore Cricket Club on a very wet afternoon. Roger was to lay a wreath for the Malayan and Singapore Volunteers at the memorial service.

After lunch we visited St Andrew's Cathedral. We saw the plaque in memory of the 41 Australian Nurses from the *SS Vyner Brooke* who died during the war - 12 killed in the bombing of their ship on February 14, 1942, 21 massacred on Radji beach, Bangka Island on February 16 and 8 who died in Muntok and Belalau prison camps. The plaque appears to be made of iron and is very dark. We are enquiring about the feasibility of having the lettering painted to read more clearly. We took a photograph of the plaque to former St Andrew's choirmaster Edwin Arthur Brown, who was interned in Changi and Sime Road and his wife Mary who sadly died in Muntok camp.

We were permitted to take some eucalyptus leave from the Cathedral to bring to the Australian High Commission the next day. I had asked if we may visit the High Commission to pay our respects to the memory of Mr Vivian Gordon Bowden, Australia's official Representative to Singapore who left on the *Mary Rose* and who was murdered by two guards in Muntok, Bangka island on February 17, 1942 after standing up in defence of a British serviceman, Frank Brewer. Mr Bowden was made to gather a bunch of wild flowers and dig his own grave before being shot. We saw the plaque in his memory at the High Commission and asked that our flowers could be placed in the room that is named for him.



Mr Vivian Gordon Bowden

The wet weather held off for the memorial service at Kranji cemetery and was very well attended. Dignitaries of many nations were present including the Lord Mayor of London. School children sang and prayers and speeches were held. Wreaths were laid by many countries' official representatives and by veterans' associations, by Roger Wilbourn for the Malayan and Singapore Volunteers and Arlene Bennett for the Australian Army Nurses from the SS Vyner Brooke. I laid a wreath made by the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital volunteers in Melbourne in memory of all civilian internees. Family members of Dr Smiley, who survived the massacre at the Alexandra Hospital on February 14, 1942, laid a wreath. 1000 folded paper cranes or Tsuru made by Japanese students were placed next to the wreaths.



They died for all free men

Members of many religions gathered at the front of the service and we stood for a 2-minute silence to remember and to hope for peace in the world. Mr Jeya Ayadurai spoke of World War 2 heroes and heroines who will never be forgotten, including Arthur Scarf, VC and resistance supporter Sybil Kathigasu.

The following Day, we met with Roger and Caroline Willbourn and Mr Jeya Ayadurai at the Tanglin Club for lunch and to reflect on the previous day's memorial service. It was a very moving and memorable several days.

BOOKS

"Sister Bullwinkel: The untold, uncensored story." By Lynette Ramsay Silver. ISBN 978 186 351 502 3. Sally Milner Publishing, Australia. Available in the UK online, including Gazelle Book Services.

Vivian Bullwinkel has put on a brave face to the world for the past 52 years, ever since she was released from a Japanese prison camp in Sumatra at the end of World War II. Her story is one she has recounted many times. Vivian was the sole survivor of a massacre of 21 nursing sisters and one civilian woman by Japanese troops on Radji Beach on Bangka Island. Vivian revealed the truth of what happened to army investigators but they censored her testimony and chose to obliterate it from the record. Despite her best efforts, Vivian was gagged from the outset by her own government and by the Australian army, who ordered her to keep quiet – an order that, as a serving member of the military, she was bound to keep. Vivian was desperate to speak out. She knew that the truth would set her free from the years of torment. Thwarted by higher authorities, by a succession of men who thought they knew better, she was prevented from doing so. Lynette Ramsay Silver has uncovered what really happened on Bangka Island. "I refuse to stay silent, to be a party to any further cover-up. It is time to tell the real story of the life of this amazing Australian woman. Vivian wanted a voice. I am proud, finally, to be able to give it to her."

Available in the UK on line, including Gazelle Book Services

https://gazellebookservices.co.uk/products/9781863515023?srsId=AfmBOoreqIZX9Qd406YWgvzLWP_ba8fTj-WzyuY2lhx3Qxjh7EA6AZNM

"Sister Bullwinkel: The untold, uncensored story."

Sally Milner Publishing, Australia.

Reviewed by Andrew Douglas.

As the third biography of war hero Vivian Bullwinkel, this book inevitably covers much familiar ground. However, as the title suggests, it sheds new light on her captivity not covered in previous books, specifically information which was repressed for decades by official channels and omitted from previous biographers.

Bullwinkel's heroism begins with the fate of her and her 21 nurse colleagues who were summarily executed during WWII on Radji Beach on the Indonesian Island of Bangka. Miraculously she was the sole survivor of this atrocity and went on to endure nearly four years as a prisoner of war in horrendous conditions.

For decades, the official version had been that these 22 nurses, having surrendered to the occupying Japanese and realising they were about to be summarily executed, stoically accepted their fate and died bravely. Unfortunately, this is a simplification of the event as certain unpalatable facts were repressed which even the sole survivor was pressured to conceal. The official sanitised version promulgated for decades is now exposed as spin.

The latest biography by Lynette Ramsay Silver reveals the whole story of these and other unfortunate women who had the misfortune to become prisoners of the Japanese. Through meticulous research of original sources, later interviews given by Vivian and her contemporaries as well as surviving physical evidence, she uncovers facts that enhance the extent of this and related war crimes.

One aspect of this violence was hinted at but never openly addressed until decades later. In fact, it was not brought out into the open until 1993 when a Korean woman (Kim Hak-Sun) published a book about her experience as a 'comfort woman' for the Japanese military during the war. This finally brought the entire sordid business into the public sphere. It was all too common for Japanese military to rape female prisoners and force them into prostitution.

How was Vivian fortunate enough to survive this horrible violation? The short answer: she wasn't. This biography explores why she (and others like her) were silenced and why this indignity is not mentioned in previous Bullwinkel biographies. During her years of captivity, she and her fellow prisoners were not spared this violation.

The evidence consists not only of the various paper trails but also the fact that certain relevant documents and reports have disappeared. Intriguingly, even a notebook Vivian kept in captivity has had part of a page cut out at what appears a significant entry. The evidence goes beyond mere documentation. It even includes Vivian's original uniform currently housed in the Australian War Memorial. Among other things, the position of the bullet holes proves that it was ripped open at the time she was shot.

The reasons why this fact was kept from the public smack of prudery as well as political and diplomatic expediency. Generally, the authorities thought the topic too 'delicate' for public consumption. Among their excuses was the desire to spare the victims' families the added trauma of such information. Even at the Tokyo War Crimes tribunal, officialdom prevented Vivian from mentioning the rapes. As a member of the armed forces, she was bound to obey orders. Bureaucracy and officialdom combined to have the matter hushed up generally.

With this book we finally learn the complete truth about the fate of the nurses of Radji Beach. They did not march bravely to the edge of the water holding hands before they were summarily executed. Instead they were violently sexually assaulted before being murdered. They did not stoically accept their fate; instead they screamed and struggled against this final violation knowing they were about to be killed. It is a disservice to these brave victims that the general public has been fed a sanitised version of their murders.

Vivian Bullwinkel was the only surviving witness of this atrocity. Given her years of captivity, sexual violence was not an isolated occurrence for her or her fellow captives. It is not surprising that she later confided to researchers her frustration at not being able to tell the whole story. Even her first biographer airbrushed the matter from his book. The detailed biography includes an appendix of brief bios and pictures of all the unfortunate nurses executed at Radji Beach, a timeline of Bullwinkel's life and details of the fate of some of the perpetrators. Disturbingly, quite a few got off comparatively lightly – a fact which adds to the outrage.

This book does more than fill in a significant gap in military history. It shows the consequences of concealing atrocities. Airbrushing the fact of constant sexual violence from the official record has two consequences: it diminishes the culpability of the perpetrators and devalues the trauma of the victims. In this instance, their trauma was exacerbated by the official pressure to remain silent.

A quarter of a century after her death, the author Lynette Ramsay Silver has finally let Vivian Bullwinkel voice the full extent of the atrocities she and her fellow prisoners suffered. Rather than detract from her heroism and basic humanity, this revelation enhances it.

"Prelude to the Monsoon." By Gideon Francois Jacobs. Published by George Mann Books. ISBN 0-7041-0074 6.

[Ed: Permission was sought from George Mann Publications to quote from this book, as the original publisher is no longer in business, and Gideon Jacobs died in 1969.

Written in 1965 – this is how **Gideon Jacobs** reported his findings as he sought to take control of Sumatra after the surrender of the Japanese and uncover their war crimes on the island.]

"When it came to organising Hell on Earth for their hapless captives, no-one in the Second World War was more adept at it than the Japanese. And few places anywhere more unspeakably vile than the infamous Japanese death camps of Sumatra.

Here, of the thousands originally herded into captivity, more than half perished in the first two years. In one camp alone, from brutality, overwork and deliberate starvation, the death rate rose to five percent weekly. Desperate situations call for desperate remedies. Thus it was that some weeks before the war's end, five men parachuted into the jungle on Japanese held Sumatra. Led by a 23-year-old Royal Marine Commando Major, their orders were incredibly simple and simply incredible: "Whatever the cost, take control of the island's 80,000-strong Japanese army, and get the prisoners out!"

These were **Jacob's** orders and during his search for prison camp survivors, he collected information from those he found in these death camps. He organised the Palembang prisoners into panels to collect information about war crimes. Their accounts were to be put into a report.

It is interesting to note in the chapter of **Jacobs'** book entitled, *"In Search of Survivors"* that while he was looking through this material, he came across a statement from a Royal Marine called **Robert Seddon**. **Jacobs** wrote: *"He told of how he had come across the bodies of twenty four nurses who had been bayoneted and shot on Banka (sic) Island. Having been washed ashore in a state of complete exhaustion he had heard firing and screaming from women. These formed part of a group of nurses who had come from a ship bombed and sunk near the coast....."*

Jacobs went on to say: *"The killing of these nurses seemed so flagrant an abuse of the rules of war that I began to look for corroboratory evidence from the file in front of me. Soon I came across an account by Ernest Lloyd, stoker in the Royal Navy."*

The account given by **Ernest Lloyd** also stated how he had survived Japanese attempts to kill all the shipwrecked men, and *"...when I returned to the beach I found some of the nurses whom I had last seen alive, dead on the beach. They were scattered in terrible attitudes and many must have been killed as they were tending the wounded men..... I heard that one nurse who was a survivor from this incident was Sister Bullwinkle (sic). I was told that she was later brought to Sumatra as a P.O.W."*

Jacobs went on to say: *"I read through these reports again very carefully..... We had already seen all the camps reported by the Japanese. Had the inmates of others also been massacred or were they kept somewhere out of sight? Might there not be other camps that the Japanese for one reason or another had not told me about?..... That evening I spoke to my team about my suspicions..... Although irrefutable evidence was lacking, we soon found that our suspicions might not be unfounded..... Once again the men combed the camps.....ending every time on a negative note..... There remained only one way to find out – to corner him."* [Colonel Yoshida, a senior Japanese officer].

Jacobs challenged **Yoshida** with unco-operativeness, and told him that it was not true they had seen all the camps in Sumatra. He said he would report him to his General and to the Allied Commander-in-Chief. At this accusation **Yoshida** appeared angry and told **Jacobs** through his interpreter (**Sodi**) that he would report back later. When they returned in a few hours, they said that *"...a serious mistake had been made..... there was still one camp they had not (been) shown."* On being asked where this camp was, **Jacobs** was told that it was at **Loeboek Linggau**. This was the first indication that this camp, hidden deep in rubber estates, existed.

The Japanese still tried hard to prevent **Jacobs** and his team from finding this camp, citing transport difficulties, but they insisted and flew down to **Lahat**. They were driven to **Loeboek Linggau**, where they found the rest of the Australian Army nurses who had survived, together with other civilian men, women and children prisoners – all in a parlous state of health. Had **Jacobs** not persisted in his determination to find the other missing Australian Nurses, this camp would never have been found in time to save these people from certain death.

Following his findings in **Loebok Linggau**, **Jacobs** sent the following telegram to Ceylon, and asked Headquarters there to send it on to the Australian Ambassador in India and to Army Headquarters in Melbourne.

'HAVE ENCOUNTERED AMONG 250 REPEAT 250 BRITISH FEMALE INTERNEES IN LOEBOEK LINGGAU CAMP SISTER NESTA JAMES AND 23 OTHER SURVIVING MEMBERS OF AUSTRALIAN ARMY NURSING SERVICES REMNANTS OF CONTINGMENT A.A.N.S. EVACUATED FROM MALAYA IN VYNER BROOKE STOP IN VIEW THEIR PRECARIOUS HEALTH SUGGEST YOU ENDEAVOUR ARRANGE AIR TRANSPORT DIRECT TO AUSTRALIA FROM HERE SOONEST STOP AM COLLECTING PARTICULARS MASSACRE OF MEMBERS A.A.N.S. ON BANKA ISLAND FOR LATER TRANSMISSION.'

There were several reasons why **Vivian Bullwinkel's** testimony at the Singapore and Tokyo War Crimes Tribunals was suppressed. Apart from not wanting to upset the relatives of the massacred Army Nurses, **General MacArthur** did not want to upset the Japanese in the postwar period because he wanted to build relationships with Japan. He felt that if the true facts about the rapes were known, there would be an outcry, and so several of the Japanese perpetrators of crimes of utter barbarity got off very lightly, and the Australian War Crimes investigator was ordered never to reveal **Vivian Bullwinkel's** original report.

"The Forgotten Indian Prisoners of World War II. Surrender, Loyalty, Betrayal and Hell."

By **Gautam Hazarika**. Published by Pen and Sword Books.

Half the troops defending Singapore in World War II were Indian, commanded by British officers. They endured almost 4 years in captivity under the Japanese, while their wives and families waited anxiously at home, with almost no word from them. Some of these 62,000 men joined the Japanese-backed Indian National Army to fight for India's Independence, others made daring escapes, staged double-crosses on the Japanese, or endured forced labour in Papua New Guinea from where most never returned. Their families lived with silence, separation, and survival against odds, while the official memory of their sacrifices faded. This book seeks to remember their courage and loss, and to restore their place in history through the memories of their descendants, some of whom will be speaking at the launch of the book in London on 21st November 2025, together with the author during his interview by **Phil Craig**.

Christmas 1942 at Palembang.

Excerpts from 'By Eastern Windows', by William McDougall.

With thanks to Anne Hinam.

[Editor: Anne Hinam's and Jean Goyder's father, **Kenneth Dohoo**, was a civilian internee in Palembang. According to copies of the "Camp News" the men raised money with various activities for both their hospital and food, and donated a sum to the Women's Camp to help with their Christmas dinner. Their father wrote the following letter to the "Camp News" about donating funds to the Women's Camp:

"Sirs,

It is no use asking men who have no money whether they want the ladies at the other camp to have Christmas dinner of fried rice and vegetables. But if this camp were for the next two Sundays to forego its usual "rysttafel" (sic) and subsist solely on the official rations, and send the money so saved to the Women's Camp, everyone will have helped to give the ladies a happier Christmas, and at a small but real cost to himself.

K.G.A Dohoo."]

*(*Rijsttafel – an Indonesian meal of many different dishes.)*

Dinner that day marked the high point of food abundance in our captivity. We had a fat Christmas in 1942. Perhaps that is why I remember the first Yuletide so vividly. It was such a contrast to subsequent ones.

Christmas morning everyone went to church, some attending services of all three faiths, starting with the Catholics' High Mass at 6.30 am. The clergy had spent days disguising their Cell Block No.3 as a church. They could not hide the barred windows or grey walls or cement sleeping benches but they softened them with greenery, flowers, fronds, and palm leaves. The working party had brought in the branches and shrubs, a Chinese woman had brought the flowers to the jail gates –making a dozen trips – and two smiling Japanese guards had brought the palm leaves! Orchids and gardenias banked the altar. Six candles flickered in tall, conical, painted candlesticks of cardboard which disguised beer bottles underneath. Beneath and above the altar were murals painted by Father Bakker on cardboard screens of the folding type used by the Chinese. The murals depicted Bethlehem's barren hills the night the shepherds received angelic tidings of the Nativity. Where he had obtained the cardboard to make the murals and the paint to paint them was Father Bakker's secret.

Protestants as well as Catholics packed the cell and the area immediately outside it. After a special Christmas morning breakfast Colijn conducted Dutch Protestant services and the reverend Wardle preached a sermon and led prayers for men of the Church of England.

That night, beneath a black velvet, cloud-swept sky, sprinkled here and there with stardust, Father Bakker's choir first sang the story of the Nativity. The kitchen porch had been transformed into a stage by judicious use of the church decorations: palm leaves, sarongs and the murals. Standing in a splash of light were the singers while beyond them in the yard's darkness men sat, squatted or stood, illuminated by the glow of their cigarettes.

Beissel and Allen read the gospel story. When their voices ceased, Father Bakker raised his baton, swept it downward and the sacred cantata began.

One of the most difficult of all things to secure in Palembang Jail was silence for events such as lectures or shows. Always there were some individuals who spoiled things for others by talking or laughing. The greatest tribute to Father Bakker's genius was the silence he and his choir secured. After the singing started not even a cigarette was lighted as the music and the memories it evoked held men completely hushed until the last notes throbbed and a full moon rose silvery and splendid to flood the jail yard and walls with light.

Seldom have I appreciated Christmas more than that day as a war prisoner in a jail beside Sumatra's Moesi River, two degrees south of the equator. Different as was that Christmas to all of us, there was about it, something that brought us closer to the real significance of the day than many of us had ever been. We had Christmas in our hearts, instead of on an electrically lighted tree or in gaudily wrapped packages from a department store.

THE HIDDEN RADIO
Chapter from "Highland Laddie"
Written by Walter Gibson

With thanks to Jonathan Moffatt

[Editor: John Hedley gives a slightly different version of this story in his Diary "The Last Days of Freedom" - which was included in the September 2025 edition of Selamat Pagi on P 8.]

One day we were informed that there was to be an inspection by some Japanese general. We were not very happy about this, because we had learned from experience that these inspections usually meant standing on parade for hours until some Japanese "personage" arrived with the inevitable retinue, who would gape at us superciliously, and pass obviously derogatory remarks about us. Then we would have to listen to a hissing, snarling address by the "personage," which, interpreted (usually by a Jap with as much knowledge of English as a rickshaw coolie), gave us to understand quite clearly that we were scum; that we should all have been decently killed by Jap warriors in battle, but now that we were alive (through the grace of the Imperial Nipponese Army) we no longer had any status but that of slaves. If we were docile slaves, however, gave no trouble and worked hard, Nippon would be kind to us. Otherwise we would be beaten, starved and killed, all in the interests of the Greater Prosperity of East Asia! On this occasion we were informed that we should be inspected in our Hong.*



Walter Gibson

When the great day arrived I was occupying a space six feet in length and three feet in width (scrupulously measured by the "Hong Commander," a Dutch officer). In this space, I had to eat, sleep and keep all my worldly belongings. Sharing this opulence was an assortment of Dutch, Eurasian, British, Canadian and New Zealand officers.

We had a "canary" (radio set) in our Hong, operated by a Malayan planter called **Headly** [Ed: This is 'our' late MVG member **John Hedley**] who held a temporary commission in the Malay Volunteers. The penalty for operating a radio set was usually a most inhuman beating, which left the victim either incapable of knowing he was to be decapitated, or yearning for it as a merciful release from his agony.

At one end of our Hong was the latrine, "a la Asia," that is, a narrow drain over which the occupants squatted and through which ran a constant stream of water. Fearing the consequences of discovery **Headly** (sic), without discussing the matter with anyone else, put his radio set into a Dutch Army pack and dumped it in the latrine.

In due course, we were called to attention by our Hong Commander (in Japanese) and the ceremony began. The "personage" was a little man, about five feet high, wearing spectacles, which gave him a rather studious and pathetic appearance, highly polished boots, and carrying at his side the usual huge Samurai sword, more suitable for a giant than a dwarf. He wore a fine olive-green jacket and breeches and had an open-neck white shirt, which looked both smart and cool. He had the gold and red insignia of his rank on his lapels and the peculiar forage type of cap with skip which all Japs wore. He was followed immediately by **Colonel Banu**, the Camp Commandant, who sported his usual toothsome smile, reminding one of a tiger who had just finished a delicious meal, and bringing up the rear were numerous aides etc.

After the little man had walked round and solemnly gazed upon us, he decided to inflict on us some words of comfort. Striding to the centre of the Hong, he spread his legs apart, took off his cap and scratched his head vigorously, cleared his throat, spat thoughtfully (following his aim with some interest), then in a ludicrously high-pitched voice delivered his speech. At the end of it he

beckoned imperiously to his interpreter and presumably ordered him to interpret.

The interpreter, a bespectacled, benign-looking old gentleman, cleared his throat and, refraining from spitting (whether from a sense of hygiene, delicacy, or just forgetfulness is unknown), proceeded to tell us that he had studied civil engineering in Glasgow as a young man, that he was very sorry to see our circumstances, but of course Nippon had been driven to war by the wicked British and even more wicked Yankees – this last accompanied by a vicious hissing.

The general, who had been examining his nails, sword, boots etc., glared irritably at his minion, who then interrupted his personal discourse to tell us hastily that the general was pleased to see us all looking so healthy and happy. He was pleased to hear that we were getting plenty of games and good food. Very soon now, Nippon and (as an afterthought) her allies would be victorious and then we could all go home. Thus, with the usual roaring, bowing and saluting, the procession departed. There was a sudden commotion at the door just as the “great one” departed, and I saw the camp sergeant-major (Jap) accompanied by **Ishi**, the camp doctor, who was carrying a Dutch pack as if it were an infernal machine.

About the centre of the Hong they stopped and **Ishi** handed the pack to the sergeant-major, who up-ended it, scattering and shattering its contents upon the floor. It was our radio! There was a deadly silence, as the realisation of what had happened penetrated our minds. I glanced hastily across at **Headly**, who was ashen and obviously scared. A Jap soldier was dispatched for **Colonel Banu** and the interpreter.

Banu arrived, minus grin; the tiger was in a dangerous mood. There was a hasty conversation between **Ishi** and **Banu**, with a lot of gesturing, first towards the radio and pack, then in the direction of the latrine. At last **Banu** turned to the interpreter and gravely and slowly gave him instructions. The interpreter, just as gravely, asked who owned the radio. There was no reply. **Banu** then spoke rapidly and angrily, and the interpreter informed us that all would be most severely punished unless the culprit owned up immediately.

Suddenly **Headly** stepped forward and, speaking in a low but clear voice, said, “I am the person responsible.” Without a word, **Banu** swung round and strode out; the sergeant-major ordered two soldiers to secure **Headly** and they too departed.

Some two hours later, **Headly** walked into the Hong. We all crowded round him, delighted at his return and avid to know what had happened. He told us he had been grilled, though without any brutality, as to where he had got the radio, how long he had been operating it and what was the latest news he had got. He replied that it was an old set he had picked up in Singapore and had kept ever since, in the hope that some day he would be able to use it. He stoutly maintained that it was useless, and had never been used and, in fact, could not be used. This was partly true, for when the Jap sergeant-major had tipped the set out of the pack on to the concrete floor it was ruined, and so the Japs swallowed the story.

During the night he was again taken to the Jap guard-room for questioning. At about 8 a.m. he returned wan and shaken, but grinning.

He told us an incredible story. After repeated questioning, he was solemnly asked if he was not aware that it was an offence to have and/or operate a secret radio. He replied that it was not a radio, but just a jumble of parts, incapable of being operated as such. He was then told that he had been naughty, and asked to promise not to misbehave again. Expressing his regret at causing any trouble, and promising to behave in future, he was dismissed. Fantastic! But so Japanese.

We came to the conclusion that **Banu** had intended to hush things up because to have taken the incident further would have entailed bringing in the dreaded Kempeitai (Jap military police) and no one could foretell what dire consequences would ensue for everyone. Needless to say, we still carried on with our other radio, though we exercised more care.

*Hongs were long barrack-like stone huts, 100 metres long and 6 metres wide, with wooden sleeping platforms on either side, 1 metre high. The concrete floor had 2 open drains, one on either side of the floor.

"S.S. VYNER BROOKE" – contd.

Sunk by Japanese bombers in the Bangka Strait, Sumatra, on 14th February 1942.

With thanks to Michael Pether for his comprehensive research into the sinking of this ship and for his permission to reproduce his information

After the "S.S. Vyner Brooke" sank

Despite the lack of panic evident en masse, the book *"On Radji Beach"* puts the death toll during the sinking at somewhere between 40 and 50 people, with about 6 people dying as a result of jumping into the sea with ill-fitting life jackets. It appears that apart from those killed in the engine room, in the staterooms and on deck by bombs and machine gunning; people lost their lives because they could not swim, because they had been injured badly during the attack on the ship; or were struck by falling rafts, debris or parts of the ship whilst it listed.

There were a few 'elderly' men and women on board who were killed during the bombing of the ship and/or drifting in the sea afterwards – but who individually have not been able to be identified during this research. Along with the gap in identified children and the estimates of the number of children who boarded the ship, it would seem that it was the very old and the very young that made up the bulk of those victims of the attack on the ship and the subsequent struggle in the sea – who even today remain nameless.

Various reports exist on the fate of nurses killed on board the ship during the bombing, others who died escaping the ship and those who drowned or perished on rafts at sea. These are included in the entries for individual nurses who lost their lives during the period of the attack and the sinking.

[Editor: See P.9 in S.P. Edition 6 for Arlene Bennett's list of Australian Army Nurses].

Lt. Arthur J. Mann, RNVR, the ship's 2nd officer was interviewed by the Australian press on his successful escape back to Australia (*"Western Mail", Perth, WA. 26.3.42*) and described the rafts as *"...Board of Trade, five feet by three feet ..."* [probably meaning five feet square and three feet deep] which makes the reality that they were tiny. **Nurse 'Mickey' Syer** recalled that the rafts of the ship were little square things made of canvas (Syer) they are also referred to as being made of 'gimrack' (which means something made of substandard material) – it seems that such life rafts were made of what we would have regarded today as two wooden pallets joined together and covered with canvas, possibly with some cork material inside. They became lethal projectiles when sliding off a ship which was listing or 'turning turtle'.

Major Tebbutt describes the scene that remained after the sinking *"...In the water there was a collection of people and flotsam scattered over about half a square mile of water. The ship's boats were seen several hundred yards away but came no closer. The swimmers were individually or in groups clinging to wreckage or floating about..."*. **Lt. Mann** describes the situation as *"...In the water were about a hundred people as far as I can estimate, heads dotted all over the place. Some calling to others, and one couple who were obviously a man and wife were floating side by side hand in hand... It was by now about 14.30. As the afternoon wore on the people became scattered, some died and their bodies continued floating in their lifejacket, and I had to push them away with a stick to stop them brushing into me..."*

Many women and children would have also died when the ship listed (or turned turtle) to starboard and fell on the second lifeboat which got away full of women and children – this is where **Wilma Young** and **Jean Ashton** managed to struggle away from the ship coming down on them, but it tragically took **Mona Wilton** down.

Others were swept away by the powerful sea currents around Bangka Island. As related by **Dr. Neil McGregor** (son of **Sister Sylvia Muir**) the bodies of **Sister McDonald** and two other unidentified nurses were found in the Indian Ocean two or three weeks later (the raft having floated in that time down to and through the Sunda Strait to the Indian Ocean which is the direction of ocean currents around Bangka Island and Sumatra at that time of year) – this was also confirmed by **Sister Wilma Oram** to ex-nurse **Dorothy Angell**, who knew **Wilma**, after the War. AANS nurses were told this outcome after being repatriated to Singapore at the end of the War, by a sailor aboard a ship which found the raft. This, of course, leaves the fate of at least three of the nurses (including perhaps **Matron Paschke**) and the two children (one being a three-year-old Chinese girl according to **Iole**

Harper) on the raft with them all, unresolved. The last time this raft was sighted being swept southwards down the Bangka Strait two of the nurses – **Sister Dorsch** and **Sister Trenerry** – were in the sea holding onto trailing ropes from the raft.

One piece of information which suggests that one or more of the nurses made an effort to swim for Bangka Island further south along the coast (perhaps when they realised that there was no more land in front of them beyond Bangka Island) is that contained in the book "*Soldier Surgeon in Malaya*" by **T. Hamilton** published in 1957 (source: **Barbara Angell** on the 'Angellpro' website). In this book it is stated that **Colonel/Matron A. 'Annie' M. Sage** of the AANS – who greeted the surviving AANS nurses after release from internment in 1945 – was told that the identity disc of **Sister Dorsch** had been found by a "...*Mrs. Armstrong (now dead)*..." on a beach on Bangka Island. The only **Mrs. Armstrong** interned in Muntok and Palembang was **Mrs. Resie Armstrong**, mother of **Ralph Armstrong** who wrote, "*A Short Cruise on the Vyner Brooke*". **Mrs. Armstrong, Ralph**, and several other members of the family were on a raft after the sinking that was also swept south down the Bangka Strait and landed initially on the Sumatran coast before being taken by fishermen to a beach on the south coast of Bangka Island and then to the town of 'Koba' on the north-eastern side of the island. **Mrs. Resie Armstrong** died in internment – the conclusion is that this was the person who found the disc and that it is possible that **Matron Paschke, Sister Dorsch** and **Sister Trenerry** made it to a beach on the Bangka Strait but were killed by the Japanese. So it is possible – as the three women hanging onto the raft drifting south along the Bangka Strait, **Matron Paschke, Sister Dorsch** and **Sister Trenerry** did make it to the beach south east of Muntok but it therefore also opens up the awful possibility that they would have crossed paths with the second landing force of the invading Japanese Army on Bangka Island – the one making for the airfield and Pangkalpinang. To have met up with soldiers with the record of war crimes in Hong Kong may have almost certainly meant the same fate for the Matron and those two Sisters and their comrades on Radji Beach.

Where did the "S.S. Vyner Brooke" in fact sink?

It has become apparent to the researcher that, historically, little interest has been paid to exactly where the "S.S. Vyner Brooke" sank and that, to reach an understanding of where this may have occurred, it is necessary to know from which direction the ship was approaching the Bangka Strait. It is again surmised that the paradigm in the minds of many writers and readers on the incident may be that the ship was at the entrance to the Bangka Strait – which appears not to be the case.

Once the location of the sinking is determined (as best as is possible) that will also be helpful in clarifying the location of the beach that **Vivian Bullwinkel**, Australian newspapers and media since the War, plus numerous authors have called 'Radji Beach'. We can attempt to do this by factoring in an estimate of what sea currents were influencing the path taken by the survivors in the two lifeboats which reached the coast of Bangka Island. We know already that the currents around Bangka Island and in fact through the entire Archipelago south of Singapore to Bangka Island – are more powerful than in many other parts of the world.

Once these two factors are determined, any conclusion of the location of the sinking will then give a base, later in this document, to consider the feasible location of Radji Beach.

1. Firstly, from which direction did the "S.S. Vyner Brooke" approach Bangka Island?

Captain Borton recorded that after leaving Singapore at 20.00 hrs (10 p.m.) on **Thurs. 12 Feb** he later reached, at midnight, (after 4 hrs steaming) the entrance to the **Durian Strait** – about 60 km. southwest of Singapore, and even today a main shipping channel – this indicates that since he only covered about 32 nautical miles he was averaging only 8 knots, probably because of potential minefields and the darkness.

Then on **Friday, 13 Feb.** @ 0800 hrs (8.00a.m.) after a further 8 hours steaming he anchored at '**LANKA ISLAND**' (*ORB, P.129 states it was called LINGGO ISLAND – it was probably PULAU LINGGA the long and narrow island west of Singkep*) indicating he had covered about 65 nautical miles at a speed of still only about 8 knots, once again as a result of darkness and then the narrow

channels around LINGGA; then later that morning @ 11.30 hrs (11.30 a.m.) he says he “...Hove Up...”, meaning raising the anchor, because planes were spotted some distance off, and steamed through what he called the LIMA CHANNEL (this is also referred to on P.166 of the book, “*Spotlight On Singapore*” as ‘Straat Lima’ and is today the ‘Selat Lima’ body of water or Strait between Singkep Island and Lingga Island) possibly to gain the eastern side of Singkep Island. Then still on Friday 13th Feb. ORB P.139, has him as either still at the place called ‘LANKA/LINGGO/LINGGA’, presumably he was just south of Pulau Lingga, or stationary again at an unknown place, but raising the anchor again @ 20.00 hrs (8.00 p.m.) “... and steering his vessel into the open sea ... headed for a nearby island large enough to shield the ‘Vyner Brooke’...”

Then on Sat. 14 Feb. @ 01.30 hrs (1.30 a.m. in the morning) he anchored at what he calls “TUJING ISLAND” (Major Tebbutt states it was called ‘TOEJOU ISLAND’ and P.166 of “*Spotlight on Singapore*” refers to it as “TOCHLOCH ISLANDS”, but not surprisingly 2nd Officer Lt. Mann is most accurate when he records that it was the “...Tujo group ... meaning seven in Malay...” - it is almost certainly PULAU TUJUH or ‘Kepulauan Tujuh’ in Indonesian, known in pre-war maps as ‘TOEDJOE Eilanden’, which lies directly to the north of TG. ULAR and TG. BETUMPAH. Then at 10.00 hrs (10.00 a.m.) on that same day Captain Borton states he again “...Hove Up...” and headed for the Bangka Strait, Mann explains that this action was taken at that time because “... at 11.00, with a deafening roar of engines, a plane swooped from over the island to starboard and over us. It looked to me like a Lockheed-Hudson and had red triangular markings of the Dutch under the wings and RAF roundel on the fuselage...”. There was serious confusion in the signals with the plane as to its identity, which was enough for Captain Borton to decide to get on the move again.

[Author Ian Shaw (ORB Ps. 141-142) still has the ship at anchor @ 11.00 hrs on the morning of Sat. 14 Feb (presumably at TUJING ISLAND/TOEJOU ISLAND/TOEDJOE EILANDEN) at the time of the first aerial attack and machine gunning and soon after that Ian Shaw has him raising the anchor and heading “... for a small cluster of islands on the horizon, near where the entrance to the Bangka Strait narrowed between Sumatra and Bangka Island...” (which is confusing since there are no more islands between there and the entrance to the Bangka Strait), then records that after about 90 minutes (making it @ 12.30 hrs midday) being “... in the lee of another small island, one a lot smaller in fact than Borton had hoped it would be...”. It is problematic as to which island this was, and it may be that the initial short voyage was within the TOEDJOE EILANDEN group now known as PULAU TUJUH. ORB P.143 then records that “... those aboard realised it was now 13.30 hrs, well past lunchtime...”]

Borton records that the bombers struck at about 13.00 hrs – Lt. Mann records that “... At 13.30 in the afternoon watch, from the north came a group of six twin-engined aircraft ... as we watched they swung round towards us and came purposefully on. As they passed the port side, the Red Japanese ball was only too clearly seen on their wings...” and Borton records the ship sank at 13.40 hrs.

[In contrast, ORB P.147 has Borton again raising the anchor at 14.00 hrs and making for “... a much larger island about 20 kilometres away...”, but the bombers struck about ten minutes into the dash for this large island (presumably Bangka Island) and, although not specified by ‘ORB’, it would seem that the book is suggesting that the ship must have sunk a little later than Captain Borton recorded, about 14.40 hrs (2.40 p.m. in the afternoon of 14 Feb.)]

The key point here is that, primarily because of the ‘8 degrees north of Muntok Lighthouse’ record but also from other less clear information, the S.S. Vyner Brooke “... appears to have approached the west coast of Bangka Island and the western entrance to the Bangka Strait from DUE NORTH...” – not from the West as might have been assumed.

2. Secondly, at what location did the “S.S. Vyner Brooke” sink and where was it when the two lifeboats struck out for Bangka Island?

The ship had a normal speed of 12 knots and was presumably steaming at around that rate of knots (in what appears to have been a comparatively eastern route to the east of Lingga and Singkep) between the “LIMA CHANNEL” and the “TUJING ISLANDS/TOEJOU or TOEDJOE EILANDEN – 12 knots equate to the same number of nautical miles an hour and so equates to about 22 kph. However, as recorded by ORB (P.148) on the day of the sinking Borton had ordered full speed ahead for the dash to Bangka Island (15 knots equate to 28 kph) so we will use a range

around this speed for this last part of the journey.

If we firstly work from **Captain Borton's** record and assume that he had left PULAU TUJUH @ 10.00 hrs he would have had some 3 hrs 20 minutes to get to the location where he was bombed, and the ship sank – and he was presumably pointing his vessel directly towards the northern entrance of Bangka Strait, which is almost exactly due South. Over the next 3 hours to 3 hrs and 20 minutes, at 15 knots he would have travelled about 83 to 92 kilometres; at 14 knots average (i.e. starting to make allowances for his evasive zig-zag course towards the later stage of his journey) he would have travelled about 78-85 kilometres; and at an average of 13 knots he would have travelled 72-79 kilometres. The distance from PULAU TUJUH (TOEDJPE EILANDEN) to TG.

BETUMPAH/BETUMPAK is about 80 kms – so he would have sunk close to that headland and possibly at least 5 kilometres off the coast since the water becomes shallow near the headlands.

If we then use the times and interim anchoring of the ship at a small island (as stated by **Ian Shaw in ORB**) which are rather confusing when looking at a map of the sea, then **Captain Borton** would have spent a total of approximately 2 hrs 30 minutes steaming – including the last run of about 1 hour from what could have been PULAU LALANG. After PULAU LALANG travelling at 15 knots he would have then travelled almost 1 hour which equates to 28-30 kms, which would leave him 35 kms north of TG. ULAR/OLEAR (the distance between TG. LALANG and TG

ULAR/OELAR is about 65 kms.)

The “**S.S. Vyner Brooke**” sank (according to **Captain Borton**) “... *eight degrees north of Muntok light...*” one interpretation for this statement (but not the normal in modern nautical terminology) is that if a line is drawn directly vertically North above ‘Muntok Light’ (i.e. Tg. Kelian lighthouse), then moved about 8 degrees (on a 360-degree compass) to the right or East then the ship sank well to the north.

Survivors also talked about being approximately 10-12 miles/16-19 kms from the western coast of Bangka Island; ORB P.165 states that the ship sank about “... *15 miles north of Bangka Island...*” which is about 24 kms.

The result of all these assumptions and calculations indicates two alternative locations for the sinking – and the starting point for the two undamaged lifeboats:

- Firstly, probably 5 to 10 kilometres north of TG. BETUMPAH/BETUMPAK and say 5 or 6 kilometres out to sea from the coast directly East
- Secondly, using the ORB information, and starting with PULAU TUJUH as the base – which is another 5 to 19 kilometres further North – and then a simple journey of one hour from LALANG the starting point for the lifeboats would be north of TG ULAR.

As the second lifeboat with **Vivian Bullwinkel** and **Second Officer Miller** plus passenger **Eric German** clinging on, began their long drift to shore it is recorded (in ‘By Eastern Windows, P. 144)

“... *after sundown they saw flashings from two lighthouses about five miles apart on the coast. Midway between them burned a large bonfire. They pulled for the fire....*” These two lighthouses would appear to have been TG. KELIAN to the south, and TG. ULAR/OELAR to the north, on the west coast of Bangka Island. These two lighthouses are 12 kilometres apart (about seven miles) which, given the distance was estimated by men in a sinking lifeboat probably seven to ten miles offshore, is a reasonable estimate. **Halfway between these lighthouses is TG. BETUMPAH.**

[Note: **Vivian Bullwinkel** said that one lifeboat had “... *civilian women and four or five Sisters...*” (testimony to Australian Board of Enquiry into War Crimes 29.10.45) which she later expanded when she said the other two lifeboats had 30-40 women aboard including 10 nurses and 30 men of the ship's crew; and a third lifeboat (the one she was aboard) had 12 Nursing Sisters, 3 civilians (a ‘Miss Beaston’, and a woman and her husband) plus one ship's officer.]

[Editor: Please note that in re-typing Michael Pether's research document on the ‘S.S. Vyner Brooke’ for this newsletter, the wartime spelling of ‘BANKA Island’ has been changed to the modern preferred spelling of ‘BANGKA ISLAND’. All other spellings of place names have remained the same as in Michael's document, although they have also been changed in modern Indonesian Malay].

OUR NURSES

By Edwina Smith

12th October 2025

[We are delighted to have been given permission to print this poem which is under copyright. Edwina is a well know poet and lives in Canberra. As a former midwife and nurse, her poem captures the unimaginable plight of the Australian Army Nurses so cruelly murdered on Radji Beach.]

Nursing those in need,
A job that few can do
Sitting by a lamp
To share a yarn or two.
Soothing fevered brow
Caring for the sick
A newborn's lusty cry
Make our nurses tick.

Our nurses do us proud
Since Australia came to be
Serving both in peacetime
Or in wars across the sea.
Diligent on duty
In many fields of care
Earning great respect
No matter when, or where.

Then came another war
Different from the last
Battles edging closer
Advancing way too fast.
An unfamiliar foe
Lethal with a gun
Unfurling flags of terror
That showed a Rising Sun.

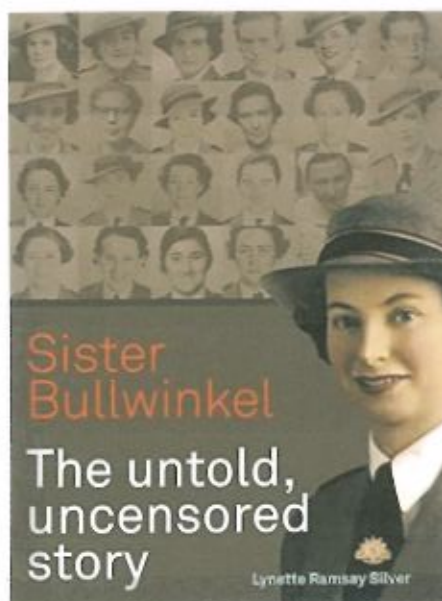
Danger all around
No longer safe to stay
Aboard the *Vyner Brooke*
They tried to sail away.
Bombs fell, the vessel sank,
But hope was just in reach
Those that could, hoped they would
Land on Radji Beach.

An Island paradise?
Perhaps in better times
Now a sickening scene
Of heinous, wicked crimes.
A tyranny of horror
Waiting to unfold
What our nurses suffered
Was never fully told.

Courage to the end
Stoic and strong willed
Forced into the water
Machine gunned, and were killed.
When all the firing ceased
No-one would survive
Except for one alone,
Who was very much alive.

Sand wore her heavy steps
A weary, wounded tread
Across a beach of sorrow
Her fellow sisters dead.
Waves then gently lapped
Where their bodies lay
Washed away the blood
And swept them all away.

Many years have passed
Since these dreadful crimes
It's now a tranquil beach
A reminder of those times.
Their resting place unknown
Somewhere out to sea
We'll not forget our nurses
Wherever they may be.



These are My War Time Diaries – Sumatra 1942-1945

By Dr. [Miss] Marjorie Lyon

By kind permission of her brother John Lyon

JOURNAL 16. Loose Pages in Folder - contd.

News 80% of POW in Thailand dead – English doctor expected – Lewis buried – House provided – British Officers arrive – Captain (Doctor) Edwards arrives by parachute

Sunday September 2nd 1945. (11th day after peace)

I then went to the office to arrange for **Lewis's** funeral and said I needed an ambulance or other car to collect his friends and we settled on 6 p.m. for the funeral. **Mitsusawa** (Nip Doctor) said he would try and get a coffin though planks were hard to get and most people were buried "kain".

I arranged with **Ross** to return for the funeral party at 6 p.m. and explained how **Lewis** had died.at about 5p.m., I went off to the Tangsi* and did a few dressings and then went back for the funeral. We left our men at the door of the mortuary which was locked and the key lost – whilst I was taken by **Dr. Marya** to arrange about our house..... The ambulance then returned with **Dr. Vis** and a few Nips, one of whom was introduced as **Dr. Sendo** in charge of the Camp. I thought we were now going to the funeral but we drove off to the camp. Finally about 7 p.m. we started off – only to find that the ambulance would not work..... We waited until about 9 p.m. and then gave up and had our dinner at 9.30. A **Mr. Nijam** told us the news - that 80% of the POW in Thailand were dead – that conditions at Fort Capello had been barbarous – that an English Dr. was expected by parachute. Finally we went to bed, expecting to hear tomorrow that **Lewis** had been buried without us.

Monday September 3rd 1945. (12th day after peace)

We went to breakfast at 9.30 a.m. and I went off to see the **Levinsons**. I suggested he get busy providing clothes and shoes for the men who were most disreputable and nearly naked..... The ambulance did not arrive at the usual time, and we sat down and waited. Then at about 12.30 p.m. **Mr. Nijam** came and told us we were to be moved to the Central Hotel..... We distained the Central and went to the hospital. After a quick look round the patients, I asked whether the funeral of **Mr. Lewis** had been completed before dark last night. The Malay clerk said it had not but was to be today. I went at once to **Mitsusawa** and asked if it could be arranged without delay as it was now over 36 hours since death. He agreed and gave me an ambulance in which I went off to the Tangsi and collected the friends. We then drove to the mortuary. I left the friends outside whilst I went in alone warned by the overpowering stench. I found the body in a quite advanced state of decomposition in the clothes in which he had died, with much offensive fluid and covered with **Elsie's** pink blanket. I sent the friends away and sent for 2 more coolies to lift him into a very rough plank coffin with planks not fitting. We put in the blanket and all as he lay, and as they lifted him there was a flood of foul fluid splashing on the floor. There was only one nail to fix the coffin lid. The coolies carried the coffin to the waiting ambulance and had to put it on the seat where of course it leaked. We had to get in beside it and all the friends (8 in all) on my advice lit cigarettes. At the cemetery we decided to bury him first and have the service after, **Mr. Robinson** officiating. The grave was ready – 194A according to its position though unmarked – and after the coffin was lowered and the grave filled **Mr. Robinson** held quite a long service – Psalms 121, 23 and 90 and a few C. of E. prayers and an address and the Lord's Prayer. He said that **Lewis** would have been glad to know that at the last he was tended by his fellow countrymen and the last rites were all performed by his own people – that he had the death and funeral of a soldier or sailor.

I asked for 6 Sisters to come and nurse the British sick, saying I had been promised a house in or near the hospital compound and telling them that there would be up to 20 sick as the men were in such a very poor condition with oedema, diarrhoea, malaria and ulceration..... There is no doubt they are in a much worse condition than the women, owing no doubt to the grossly unfair conditions re: food at the Men's Camp.

*Tangsi= KNIL Military Barracks housing Allied POWs & civilian men

Tuesday September 4th 1945. (13th day after peace)

After a sleepless night we got up and as soon as breakfast was over..... went off to the Tangsi to get the 6 Sisters. We went by ambulance and brought them to the house and left them to settle in..... the house was cleaned with the help of a few coolies and boys and a Malay *babu* was brought to help in the afternoon.

After the clinic, I walked back to the Military Hospital and then on to our house now very spruce and comfortable. The house is about ½ km from the hospital and was recently occupied by Nip Officers, I think. One half is clean and the other – ours – very dirty. The 6 Sisters live in the half nearest the hospital and **Keta, Mrs. Whalen, Elsie** and I in the 2nd half with an empty room. There is a telephone and a Frigidaire and a light in most places.

Wednesday September 5th 1945. (14th day after peace)

Today we arranged, via **Dr. Marya**, for the rations for the 10 of us to be collected uncooked as it is a nuisance collecting cooked food and as we prefer to cook under our own roof where some attempt can be made to prevent fly contamination. Flies and mosquitoes are awful.

At about 12.45 p.m. there being no conveyance, I set off on foot and walked back to the Tangsi. Whilst at the Tangsi I saw **Ross** who told me that the Indonesians had **proclaimed a free and independent Indonesian State** and that the Dutch were in a bit of a panic and no-one should be out. However, I was sporting a Union Jack on my pocket and carried a Red Cross satchel and was in no way molested, though there were many Indonesians standing about the streets. It was also the end of Puasa.

Dr. Vis (Dutch Dr.) came and asked for help from our Sisters as his own were either not here yet from Bangkinang or were refusing to work..... he wanted 2 on day duty and 2 on night. The Sisters at the Tangsi were by no means keen – the British Indian (nurses) refusing outright and 2 others (from our household) volunteering reluctantly..... the night Sisters have agreed to look after the Dutch patients as they did for ours at the beginning – (with) newly arrived from Bankinang making something over a hundred in all Dutch patients.

I hear that now attempts are being made to check the evacuation from Bangkinang. **Mevr Beudel** who arrived last night said that the camp is being cleaned up but there is much dysentery. She also said that they had been visited by a blonde British Officer whom she thinks came by plane.

Thursday September 6th 1945. (15th day after peace)

Today we were escorted again to the Tangsi by the Japanese **Dr. Sendo** and a few sergeants and orderlies, and had a big crowd watching the Clinic.

This evening **Hetamai** rode up on his bicycle in a great state of excitement stuttering fragments of Malay and Japanese. I gathered that an English Dr. was either at the M.H. (Military Hospital) or was coming and that **Elsie** and I were to go and meet him. I shouted to **Elsie** the news and the Nip urged me to hurry up. Whilst we were still discussing things a car drove up and **Dr. Mitsusawa** and **Dr. Marya** all dressed up alighted – also very excited and explained that they had just had a telephone message that an English Army Dr. was on his way from Fort de Kok by car and would arrive any moment and they had come to take us to meet him. **Elsie** came and we all got into the car and drove to the M.H. where the whole Nip medical staff was lined up like a bunch of excited children. **Mitsusawa** had forgotten his sword and had to send for it. They stood to the left of the entrance and we to the right. I must say we were excited too. After a wait of about 5 minutes a whole procession of cars appeared and drove past in the direction of Tangsi. **Mitsusawa** at I once suggested that he take us after them and shouted for his car. **Elsie** and I piled in and he drove us to the Tangsi. We all three pushed our way in and found a large knot of Nips and internees at the entrance surrounding 2 lads with wide floppy khaki felt hats whom we greeted as our own. They were 2 Australian technicians and showed us the 2 officers in the middle of another huddle ahead. One of the Australians said he was **Gillian** and came from Northam but did not know anyone called **Lyon**. I was too excited to wait and **Elsie** and I joined the other crowd and found ourselves before 2 tall handsome young men in parachute uniform talking to **Ross** who introduced us to **Major Jacobs*** – a British Officer from S. Africa.

[*See Jacobs "Prelude to the Monsoon" P.7]. 23.

who was not a Dr. and who had flown from Medan to F de K today and came on by car. He had flown from Ceylon to Medan - 10 hours flight - and represented **Lord Louis Mountbatten** who had, he said, occupied Singapore today. His mission is to fly round the camps of all internees and P.O.Ws. in Sumatra and then to go back to Singapore to report to **Mountbatten**. He had already inspected Medan and was spending only this evening in Padang and going on to Bangkinang tomorrow by car. **Lt. v Beek** is a Dutch officer on his staff and is to stay in Padang with a wireless receiving and transmitting set to send off lists of requirements urgently needed which will be sent to us by parachute, including medical staff. Our first question was of our chances of going home and our next of receiving news. It seems we must be patient - there is no contact with the Allies except by air because the seas are full of floating mines. The approach to Singapore has taken all these days to clear and **Lord L.** has now moved his headquarters to Singapore. Asked whether we should have to wait days, weeks or months, he answered weeks. As to letters, nominal rolls will be published abroad as soon as possible but we have no immediate prospect of sending or receiving radios or letters. The order of precedence by parachute is medicines, food, clothes, literature and mail. **Lord Louis'** message is to wait patiently and to stay in our camps. Conditions have been much worse elsewhere and 80% of those imprisoned in Thailand and Burma are said to be dead. Several thousand survivors have been flown to Ceylon as the first step home.

We made a quick tour of the British part of the camp and **Jacobs** kept telling us how much better off we were than Medan and did not seem to take it in that we had only been a few days away from Bangkinang. He shook hands with all the British we met or greeted them and spoke cheerfully just like a Royal Tour but he did not seem to have time to do any real inspection or listening. He said he had not slept for 5 nights and was anxious to get off. I asked him to drop in at the M.H. and see our 215 patients and he was reluctant until I told him he would have to pass the building and need only spend 5-10 minutes in cheering up our poor devils. We all piled into cars..... and got there as soon as he did and were in time to introduce **Marya & Mitsusawa**. I walked beside him and told him the Jap Drs. were doing everything they could and supplied us with food, clothing etc..... The patients received **Jacobs** with joy and most of the men wept a few tears. He went round shaking hands and promising to get them home soon and then insisted on going round the Dutch wards where no one took much notice and only a few hands were stretched out.....

This was a great day - our first contact with our own people for 3½ years.

Friday September 7th 1945. (16th day after peace)

This morning after the round we went to the Orange by car to see **Mr. Levison**. He said that the Tangsi had held a meeting after **Jacobs'** visit and were very dissatisfied and that **Ross** had sent him an S.O.S. on reception of which, he had gone to see **Jacobs** this morning and taken him down to talk to the British before he left for Bangkinang - and they had received permission for a wireless set which was being installed today.....

Saturday September 8th 1945. (17th day after peace)

This morning, I took 3 patients to the Tangsi..... and later with **Elsie** (went) to the Orange (hotel) to see the Dutch **Lt. v Beek** re: obats (medicines) needs. I had a list of medicines and food ready..... He said the supplies available were unlimited but that transport was - every load meant 20 hours flying from Ceylon for a crew of 9. He said there were teams of Drs. available but he had been instructed not to send for these unless urgently needed until the rest of Sumatra had been reported on. I said there were enough Drs..... and said that **Elsie** and I were willing to help with the care of the Dutch. I said there had been difficulties with the Dutch Drs. at which he nodded.....

We are getting on much better with **Dr. Marya**. **Elsie** says she has received a definite impression that our behaviour re: **Jacobs** met with their approval and that they had expected to be ignored or treated rudely.

Sunday September 9th 1945. (18th day after peace)

..... After the morning round (during which I met **Sendo** and asked him for a list of obats for the Tangsi) I came home and began to write up arrears.....

Monday September 10th 1945. (19th day after peace)

Today we spent the morning at the hospital and then came home to do some writing.....

Tuesday September 11th 1945. (20th day after peace)

This has been the best day of all. We heard aeroplanes yesterday evening and later rumours went round that British Officers had parachuted down but we had no certain news. **Elsie** and I were in the middle of doing a round when we heard noises in the Men's Ward and ignored them thinking it was only **Lt. v. Beek & Co.** visiting. Just as we were coming out, a fair haired tall young man in parachutist uniform appeared at the door and introduced himself as **Dr. Edwards** – a British R.A.M.C. Captain who had landed by parachute last night and was in charge medically of all local P.O.W.s and internees. My first question was whether he was staying here or flying on and I was greatly relieved to hear he was staying. He was very kind and **Elsie** and I had quite a little conference – he telling us of new drugs including Penicillin which he had with him. His unit appeared to consist of a **Major Hill**, **Captain Taylor** (Engineers) **Lt. Prosser**, an orderly for **Capt. Edwards** called **Little**, and an orderly for the **Major** and their work is the repatriation of prisoners. It was a grand and exciting morning and we all felt that our troubles were over now that we had British officers - and such kind and capable looking ones to stay here. I introduced **Dr. Marya** and after an hour or so they went off to the camps, and after a little a car turned up to take **Elsie** and me to the Yamato Hotel. There we met our unit again..... **Major Hill** offered us some parachutes – both **Elsie** and I accepted one each from **Lt. v. Beek**. We also got a number of copies of the S.E.A.C. newspaper, one with the resume of the war.....

Wednesday September 12th 1945. (21st day after peace announced).

We see by the S.E.A.C. newspaper that Nippon surrendered on Aug 14th and so we were 8 days late in hearing the news.

To day **Capt. Edwards** and his orderly spent the morning cataloguing the patients and staff in A.B.C.D.E. & F. for transport – A being fit and F needing special transport. I did not see how we were being placed but I think **Elsie** is in C and I am B.

Thursday September 13th 1945. (22nd day after peace announced).

Today **Captain Edwards** categorized the British Indians at the Boei and found 2 B.Is in hospital who have been rotting there for many months. They are miserable but not ill and I took them over to keep the British all under British control. They tell us they were captured near Batu Pahat early in '42 after 7 days fighting in which all but about 100 odd out of 1200 Indians, Australians and British were killed. They were cut off and were without food. Since then they have been sent to Sumatra by Nip and 154 are at the Boei – and 3 were killed by being beaten up by Nip – to such a degree that they died a few weeks later and only 1 died of B. Dysentery - 4 deaths out of 158 which is better than our figures. We British civilians have lost 11 men and 4 women since internment. I only saw **Edwards** at the hospital for a while this morning.....

Red Cross parcels from the Australian R.C. were distributed by **Taylor** yesterday. They were excellent with 30 items. These packets were sealed and arrived intact. Dutch and British men received one each and there were glass bottles of sweets for the children. The women's packets have been opened and rifled by the Dutch ladies at the Orange Hotel, and so each had different contents. Our patients each received an Indian Red Cross bag with an assortment of things. I hear there was chocolate in them originally none of the British, either in hospital, Tangsi or men's (camp) received any of it. Our unit is very annoyed at the Dutch behaviour. I hear **Major Hill** is flying to Medan today to try and get a ruling, as his work is being impeded by the Dutchman **v. Beek** who says he is acting for **Jacobs**.

Friday September 14th 1945. (23rd day after peace news).

Today I met **Edwards** at the hospital and had a few minutes talk arranging for the ward next to us to be made ready for his 7 British Indians and the 2 already in the hospital, all to be under our care. He told me that he had received a message from Medan that **Hill** is in complete control. He had to obtain details re: hospital capacity, staff etc. **Edwards** does not attempt to hide his dislike of the Nips and is just polite, no more. He tells us of Jeep cars which sound miraculous – and wooden aeroplanes and all sorts of advances – we feel very much Rip van Winkles. I have not yet had time to read the papers he gave us, and at any rate my eyes are so bad I can only read with difficulty print as small as that. **Elsie** was disgusted I told **Edwards** she was not well enough to undertake any work – she should be sent off as soon as possible. We both want to go to Malaya first and then she to England, I to Australia before working again in Malaya..... This has been my slackest day so far. [To be continued].

EXCERPTS FROM "WOMEN INTERNED IN WORLD WAR TWO SUMATRA"

By Barbara Coombes

By kind permission of her daughter, Sarah Coombes.

"May the Day of Freedom Dawn."

The news in March 1945 that these already emaciated, emotionally drained and sick women were to be moved yet again was unfathomable and totally ruthless. Not only were they to be moved back to mainland Sumatra but also deeper into the jungle further south than Palembang to Loeboek Linggau. Their final destination was to be a camp in an old rubber plantation called Belalau. Although they were glad to be leaving Muntok with its untold misery of '*Banka Fever*', all were fearful of yet another long journey with frames barely capable of carrying out daily tasks let alone travelling hundreds of miles.

They were to go in three batches starting on 8th April. **Shelagh (Brown)** went with the first group describing it as:

"Awful journey – first night on ship – 2nd in train, and 3rd in train – very little food – rain at 4.30 a.m. when turned out of the train – soaked – bus journey here. Awful block leaking roof – very hard work – haul rice sacks, dig graves – bury dead..."

.....This boat journey from Muntok on Banka Island was to cross the Banka Strait and then down the Moesi River to Palembang; the very same journey that they had made in November 1944 but in reverse and one that they made from Muntok at the beginning of internment.....

All diaries and/or accounts talk of their total and absolute misery on this journey; in particular the suffering of the sick and dying lying on stretchers across the deck under the glaring sun and unbearable heat. The agony was not at an end when they arrived at Palembang; there was still the onward journey to Loeboek Linggau. The sick were loaded onto goods wagons and the rest into filthy carriages, however as it was late in the evening the trains were to stay stationary for the night. They had very little food or drink but added to this unimaginable horror was the command that they must keep all doors and windows closed. It was endurance surely beyond human capabilities to sit all night in an overcrowded, suffocating, filthy, pitch-black truck with people suffering with, amongst other ailments, dysentery and malaria who had already endured a long journey via sea. The agony of this trek was utterly horrendous and many died on the way; one at sea where she was buried. How any of the women survived this deplorable treatment is down to the nursing community who took care of the sick and the sheer grit and determination and courage of the others.

The next morning, at last, the carriages began the twelve-hour train journey to Loeboek Linggau; all they had was a little brown bread to eat, although many had doubts about its authenticity! In the absence of any further offer of food, it was, in their eyes, better than the proverbial rice! A little fresh air at last could be felt with blinds and windows up... except when they approached a station they were told to lower them ... for what purpose they never found out. Over crowding, heat, exhaustion and illness were taking their toll and many who were already ill before embarking on this ludicrous journey were near death. The elation at arriving at Loeboek Linggau was short-lived. After initially getting out for fresh air, they were herded back into those awful carriages; it was dark and too late to continue the journey by road and they would have to face another night on the stationary train. This harrowing and hideous journey was surely torture of innocent women and children which clearly knew no bounds

In the morning no one was surprised to learn that more women died during the night and twelve since leaving Muntok. The ridiculous 'pantomime' of Tenko took place before they finally set off for Belalau where once more the guards could not get the number correct until it was pointed out that many had died en route.....

Deaths at Belalau escalated as the years of starvation and illness took their toll, the women had no strength or reserves; the will to live in these squalid conditions just could not overcome the years of deprivation. They were, if only they knew, so close to the end of the war but for many their endurance could go on no longer..... The small group that began life so many years ago in Garage Nine was dwindling; so many had lost the battle to survive and now just months away from freedom still more were to lose their personal battles.....

Shelagh's brief entry in her diary on 24 August 1945 reads: "*PEACE. Seiki (sic) tells us under trees at 3 p.m.*" Peace had been declared on 15 August but it took nine days to reach the women in this remote jungle environment.

Years later **Shelagh** recalled the events in more detail:

"One afternoon we were all ordered to assemble under the trees up on the hill towards the guardhouse. The guards were unpleasant to those who were too ill or weak to leave their bed spaces and we had to plead for them. Capt. Seiki (sic) appeared all polished up in his uniform with long sword etc. – much umphing to his minions who returned to the guardhouse and brought back a table and chair. Ugh, we thought a long meeting? And to our surprise and great amusement he mounted the chair and stood on the table and thus announced, "We are friends now – the war is over – velly solly, it has not been easy." We were to be good until the English, French, Americans, Australians, Russians or someone came – so we learnt we had Allies. We listened and returned to light our afternoon fires, our only cooking pot leaking – and suddenly it dawned on me what had been said – it didn't matter now! Tears in the pot then!".....

Many have described that day as feeling like a deflated balloon; suddenly the war was over and yet they felt unable to rejoice wildly in the way that they had dreamt of for so many years. '**May the Day of Freedom Dawn**' were the words that they had sung every Sunday over the years, but now it was difficult to assimilate after so many years in captivity; their thoughts naturally went to all those for whom the news came too late.

A few days later on 26th August, **Shelagh** briefly noted:

"Men invade camp – strong gangs take over hard work – rebuild fireplaces and chop wood, haul water. Rations increase. Men bring in pig and fruit from shop. Smothered in bugs and bites. Bad foot. Red X rations (Nips) soap, cigs, towelling – Klim given to sick."*

*Klim – a dried milk powder

Excitement and anticipation were high when the men arrived, however for some, on both sides, it brought more heartache when they found family members had not survived..... **Shelagh** recorded that during the week of 2nd September:

"... Parachutists have arrived and yesterday a Major Jacob R.M. came and spoke to us and said that they were doing their best to improve conditions. Hawkers in camp – big bartering trade goes on. Coolies in kitchen. Lots of food and clothing for us. Have had picnic under trees. Lots of rain and leaks still in roof – but TEDA APA! (Never mind) PEACE! (But not in this camp yet!!)"

Many years later **Shelagh** remembered that week:

"Red Cross Medical Supplies were also dropped into camp by parachute and we hoped we'd not get hit by them – but it was an exciting experience. The parachutists referred to were the first people into the camp from OUR outside world – an Australian, a Chinese and probably a Javanese to show them the way – I saw them come into camp. They went to the Guard House and at night now we could hear signals going out. We were linked up at last to the outside world."

Major Jacob's book, "Prelude to the Monsoon" provided the story behind the location of the internee camps in Belalau, believed to be the last to be found in Sumatra.....

The exact location of camps and numbers of internees was at best sketchy and this would be their first task; they could not be sure of co-operation from the Japanese and would also need to watch for local political movements agitating for independence from the Dutch. After locating the camps, their immediate needs would be food, medicine and the enormous task of repatriation.....

Receiving very little help from the Japanese..... After much questioning, searching and pressing the Japanese for an answer, their reply, reluctantly, was there had been a mistake and there was one more internee camp at Belalau! **Major Jacobs** insisted they visit the camp and was shocked at the condition of the women and the camp, the worst he had seen.....

As the women slowly began to actually believe that the war had ended, their obvious next question was 'when do we go home?'..... Early in the morning of 15th September, the Australian Army Nurses were the first to leave, alongside those who were in urgent need of medical assistance. They flew back to Singapore from Lahat courtesy of the Royal Australian Air Force..... At last, on 19th September at 4 a.m. it was **Shelagh's** turn to leave behind the squalid surroundings in this jungle. Flying back to Singapore firstly over the green jungle and islands of Sumatra which was a beautiful sight and as we approached Singapore there was a magnificent sunset – '*brilliant colours and below and all around the island we saw the most massive Allied Fleet – an incredible sight to behold – and a wonderful return.*'

Editor: We would be very grateful for articles for this newsletter. Please contact:

Rosemary Fell, Millbrook House, Stoney Lane, Axminster, Devon EX13 5EE. e-mail: rosemaryfell11@gmail.com