

Training, ethos, camaraderie and endurance of World War Two Australian POW nurses

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Thesis Statement

On 12 February 1942, during World War II, the ship the *Vyner Brooke* fled Singapore as it was being attacked by the Japanese. On board were civilian men, women and children and a group of 65 Australian Army nurses who were forced to abandon their patients in hospital when the order to evacuate had been given. Two days later the ship was bombed by the Japanese and sunk near the shore of Radji Beach on Bangka Island. The nurses who survived became prisoners of the Japanese and were interned for three and a half years until after the conclusion of the war. This thesis argues that the nurses' professional training, ethos and camaraderie contributed significantly to their endurance in Japanese captivity during the years 1942 to 1945. Using archival research, the nurses' own memoirs and autobiographies about the event, the thesis examines their ethos, camaraderie and resourcefulness. It highlights the specific tools the Australian women used to survive internment, and the loyalty they had to one another, the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) and Australia. These bonds of friendship continued after the war had concluded and reinforced the strength of the camaraderie amongst the Australian nurses forged during internment and in response to the deprivations they suffered.

Research Questions

The research question for this thesis is:

To what extent did professional training, ethos and camaraderie contribute to the endurance of Australian nurses in Japanese captivity, 1942-1945?

In order to answer this question, a number of other questions were raised and investigated.

- 1) How was the camaraderie evident within the group?
- 2) Did the nurses' pre-war living-in training assist their adaptation to internment?
- 3) How did the nurses demonstrate resourcefulness and endurance during their internment?
- 4) Did the nursing ethos and their inclusion as part of the Armed forces assist their discipline during internment?

- 5) Are the stories of the Australian nurses' prison experiences sanitised, and, if so, how does this distort the history of the experience?

Methodology

The diaries and other writings of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses are critiqued from the point of view of feminist autobiographical theory. This theory works to revisit the history of the events through the female perspective. By re-reading the literature already in place and reviewing history from the female viewpoint it therefore focuses on the females' experiences of the events and history they lived through. The inclusion of a female point of view adds to the historical framework already in place about Australia's involvement in World War II. Chapter 2 provides examples of how the female perspective applies to the stories of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses and their prisoner of war experience.

The history of the events of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses are explored through archival research, focusing on primary and secondary resources. These include the nurses' diaries, and interviews taken after their imprisonment and as older women. Transcripts and newspapers articles which concentrate on the army records of the nurses and their experiences during the war have been accessed from the Australian War Memorial. Other sources include autobiographies and histories written not only about the *Vyner Brooke* nurses, but also about the history of Australian nursing from the time of Florence Nightingale and Australia's involvement in World War I and World War II.

The literature of captivity

The experiences of the Australian Army nurses who served during World War II are described in a number of texts. These include published histories, autobiographies and the nurses' own private diaries, letters and recollections of the events. A number of books have been written which record the events as they happened and explain the actions and commitment of the nurses to their patients and to each other during their wartime experiences. An aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the camaraderie of the group and the bonds of friendship strengthened during this experience and assisted the survival of the women imprisoned after the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*.

The great majority of texts written about World War II prisoners of war encapsulate the stories of the Australian men who were imprisoned and do not

often deal with the female members of the Australian Army, who were also taken prisoner by the Japanese. The stories are written from a male standpoint; consequently, they continue to perpetuate the masculinisation of the Australian war experience¹. A number of works exemplify this type of literature. Peter Ewer's *The long road to Changi*, concentrates on the stories of the men who fought in Singapore before the capitulation to the Japanese and how they specifically endured life as prisoners of war. The book gives an historical understanding of the events surrounding the men of the 8th Division but does not include the story of the nurses' own evacuation from Singapore and subsequent detention as prisoners of war. *The Spirit of the Digger* by Patrick Lindsay also focuses mainly on the stories of men, explaining the kindred connection they had towards one another by using direct reference to individual stories.

Before the conclusion of the war in 1944 General Gordon Bennett, the Commander of the 8th Division, published his book *Why Singapore fell*. He is known for deserting his troops for his own safety as Singapore capitulated². This work offers his own perspective of the events and why the Australians were defeated. He includes fleeting references to the AANS, for example: "The remainder of the Australian nursing sisters and the two matrons have embarked for return to Australia. This is good news, as I am firm in my resolve that our nurses shall not become prisoners of the Japanese"³. He may have been resolved in his own retelling of the events, but it was the delay in making the decision to evacuate the nurses that led to their imprisonment when their ship was sunk.

The Literature on Training

To focus the thesis on nurses and to provide a context to the way nurses were trained and the expectations placed on them, including the regimentation of their lives through their living-in-training, a brief overview of the history of nursing itself has been included. This explores the changes enacted by Florence Nightingale as evidenced in Helen Rappaport's *No Place For Ladies* (2007). Rappaport's work explores Nightingale's experience during the Crimean War and how her philosophy of nursing was instituted in the war zone. Prior to Nightingale arriving there had been a large number of casualties due to the

¹ Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. Rivett, *Behind Bamboo*. Russell Braddon, *The Naked Island*.

² Ewer, *The long Road to Changi: Australia's great military defeat and how it broke the bonds of empire*, (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2013), 283

³ Gordon Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1944), 184

unsanitary conditions, rather than from wounds caused by fighting. Nightingale, as Matron, took dictatorial charge over her Sisters, ensuring absolute obedience from them as they changed hospital nursing through enforcing strict cleanliness of the wards and of their patients. This book described the training regimes of the nurses, the expectations placed on them by Nightingale and how this training program changed nursing in Britain and subsequently around the world, after this war. The work highlights the importance of the camaraderie that existed between the women, how their experience of war bonded them further and the resourcefulness they implemented through the long hours and difficult working conditions they endured.

Notes on Nightingale: The influence and legacy of a nursing icon (2010) edited by Siobhan Nelson and Anne Marie Rafferty, also explores the influence of the Nightingale training system. This work concentrates not only on Nightingale's time in the Crimea but also on the long enduring influence her training has had on nursing in hospitals around the world. Judith Godden's chapter describes the bringing of Nightingale nursing to Australia by Lucy Osburn, who arrived to the country with five Nightingale trained nurses. Godden has also written a monograph, *Lucy Osburn a Lady displaced*, which further explores the life of Lucy Osburn, her training at Nightingale's School, St Thomas' in London and her employment at the Sydney Infirmary in Australia. Osburn instituted the Nightingale training system which then spread throughout Australia by training local women to work in hospitals. Godden's history of Osburn further confirms the camaraderie that existed between the nurses and their endurance during the difficult working conditions. This was the system under which the nurses of World War I and World War II trained.

Veiled Lines by Ruth Rae (2009) describes the implementation of nursing in Australia and its involvement in World War I. This book explains the history of nursing in the country prior to Osburn's arrival and follows the development of the AANS after Federation. Elizabeth Burchill's *Australian nurses since Nightingale 1860 – 1990* includes the influence of Nightingale on Australia nursing and explores the role of nursing in the Australian war experience. Burchill's book includes only a brief overview of this as she focuses on all aspects of Australian nursing, rather than concentrating only on World War Two or the female prisoner of war experience. Suzanna De Vries' work *Heroic Australian Women* includes interviews with a range of Australian women, not all of whom were involved in the war effort. She does include a number of individuals from the *Vyner Brooke* group and her interviews provide another perspective on the stories previously related elsewhere.

This thesis argues that the discipline the nurses experienced in their training contributed to their survival in the prison camp. Literature such as *Apprentice in Black Stockings* (Norma Sim) and *Living in* (Carol Piercey) gives details of the training of Australian nurses into the 1970s and contributes to the argument about how this training helped the survival of the imprisoned *Vyner Brooke* nurses, although neither of these books refer to nurses serving in wartime. The movie *Paradise Road*, which was released in 1997 is loosely based on this group of nurses and moves these stories into the public domain where they can be viewed by a wider audience. The over-dramatization of events and extension of the truth regarding the experiences of some of the nurses does mean that their endurance and camaraderie is overshadowed by a narrative plot; nevertheless, the film does focus on their story.

The Literature of Nurses in Warfare

Peter Rees' book *The Other ANZACs* (2008), about World War I Australian nurses, begins to address the concept of nurses being considered ANZACs in their own right. The intention of this thesis is to further this discussion and relate the same concepts to the Australian nurses of World War II. This involves bringing to the fore the stories of the women and highlighting their own adaptability to the harshness of internment. The female experience is then revisited and reworked in the context of Australian military history and the overall understanding of Australians at war. Historian Kirsty Harris focuses on this aspect in her book about World War I Army nurses: *More than bombs and bandages*. The title itself explains the involvement of the women and emphasises that their work was not just about warfare and nursing, but also about the relationship between the women and the camaraderie, which developed in response to the privations they encountered. *Willingly into the Fray: One hundred years of Australian Army Nursing*, edited by Catherine McCullagh, similarly attempts to write women back into the wartime history through interviews with the women actively involved. As the subject of the work covers a century of nursing it is not able to delve specifically into the experiences of the imprisoned *Vyner Brooke* nurses; it alternatively offers a brief overview of the perspective of some members of the group. *Kitty's War* (2013) by Janet Butler tells the story of Kit McNaughton, an Australian woman who nursed during World War I. McNaughton's diary entries describe her own experience of the war and indicates that World War I nurses received little commendation upon their return to Australia as their history was marginalised against the male experience.

A number of the secondary sources relate experiences of Australian nurses during World War Two. Jan Bassett's *Guns and Brooches* (1992) described the activities of Australian nurses in Singapore, Egypt and Europe. This is an important text as it highlights the development of the Australian nursing service during, between and after the wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the book's focus is solely on the experience of women. It does not, however, explore the relationships of the nurses, nor look at the reason why the nurses are marginalized from the male dominated Australian ideology of involvement in the War. *A Woman's War* (Barbara Angell), which is a biography of Wilma Oram's life (2003) and Norman G Manners' biography *Bullwinkel* (2008) are thorough retellings of the stories as they affect the individuals involved before, during and after the war. These stories are uncritical in their take on the events with their unashamed praise of the nurses. They indirectly deal with the subject matter that will be researched in this thesis. Rupert Goodman has also endeavoured to discuss the role of Australian nurses in his history *Our War Nurses*, which focuses on the Australian Army Nursing Service from 1902 to 1988. His work includes stories, which begin to explain the endurance of the nurses and their camaraderie, but it is written from an emotional and therefore biased point of view.

To commemorate the life of Ada Bridge, who died during the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, Joan Crouch has written a biography entitled *One life is ours*. (1989). This recollection reinforces the importance of the stories of the women by focusing on the life of someone who did not return to Australia. As Ada could not describe the sinking and was not imprisoned, this history relies on secondary resources to construct the events and does not add new material to the story. *Victoria's Living Memorial*, written by Jennifer Williams, is a history of the Nurses Memorial Centre, which was created as the culmination of ideas the nurses had during internment. This literature includes the stories of Vivian Bullwinkel and Betty Jeffrey and how they raised funds to open the centre after the war. Its perspective, however, is on the centre itself and not on the relationship between the women during the war. Nancy Millard's autobiography about her time serving with the AANS during World War II, *Our War Too*, also helps to demonstrate the changing perspective of women in the war, while at the same time describing the frustration that nurses continue to be left out of the war time historical framework. Her story relates to nursing in the Middle East, so, while this work provides context for nursing during World War Two it does not relate directly to the experience of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses.

The nurses are often referred to as a collective, the “Bangka Island Nurses” or the “Nurses of the *Vyner Brooke*”, and there is little study of the individual friendships or the imputed ‘Australian’ qualities, like the use of sardonic humour or larrikinism, which potentially contributed to their ability to endure the hardship of imprisonment. Alternatively, stories concentrate on a single experience such as that of Vivian Bullwinkel (the sole survivor of the Bangka Island massacre) and do not take into account the group mentality of all the nurses involved in this imprisonment. Ian W Shaw’s *On Radji Beach* recounts the historical events of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses at the beginning of their war experience in Singapore until their release at the end of the war. While it mentions the friendships and relationships of the women, it does not go into a detailed exploration of what this bond meant for their lives during the war and does not specifically examine their capacity for endurance. Catherine Kenny’s history *Captives*, however, does provide a detailed examination of the experiences of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses and compares them to another group of Australian nurses taken by the Japanese from Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. This thesis, alternatively, explores the camaraderie, endurance and resourcefulness of only the *Vyner Brooke* Nurses. Consequently, it is able to examine the circumstances of their imprisonment in greater detail than Kenny’s study. Furthermore, because it draws on a range of first person accounts from the nurses in the group, it is able to compare and contrast personal perspectives and place them in a broader context than has been attempted in previous biographies and autobiographies.

Captives’ Accounts of their Imprisonment

The primary sources relevant to the subject of this thesis, written by the nurses who survived imprisonment by the Japanese, are central to the study. Betty Jeffrey’s biography *White Coolies*, which was written during internment and published in 1953, described the relationship between the nurses and the endurance they employed, which became a characteristic of their ability to survive. These stories complement the work of Jessie Simons who wrote a diary during internment and published it as *While history passed* (1954). This narrative highlights her own involvement in the war and her relationship with individual nurses. Similarly, Pat Gunther’s autobiography *Portrait of a Nurse* (2001) described her own experience of this imprisonment and her interaction with the Australian women and civilian internees. This primary resource is mediated by fifty years and her memory of the experience is directly related to one of the issues to be addressed in this study: that the nurses vowed never to disclose certain experiences and they maintained this silence despite the

passing of many years. These works by the nurses or written about the nurses do not offer a new interpretation of the history. Instead, they work to add texture and construct other concepts that broaden the Australian war identity by putting the stories about women next to those already in place about men. Quite often the stories are intertwined, especially for the *Vyner Brooke* nurses who were caring for the soldiers in Singapore before they were forced to leave and who, as POWS, were at times located in camps close to the male POWS. If these histories are not considered as part of the story of the Australian war effort, then the actions of women become marginalised. Jean Ashton's diary, published by her daughter, gives a day-by-day written log of the nurses' actual experience. Had it not been published by her family, who considered it relevant and important, this history would have remained in the private sphere.

There are several civilian accounts of Japanese imprisonment, which provide differing perspectives to the experiences of the AANS nurses. Ralph Armstrong's recounting of the events in *Short cruise on the Vyner Brooke* adds to the history of the events, as he was with the nurses when the boat sank, but his story relates to his own family and, as a male, he was quickly separated from the women. Agnes Keith, who was a writer before being imprisoned, gives a negative depiction of how the women survived internment in *Three came home*. While her story does show some camaraderie among the women, it details the difficulties of existing together with civilians who were not used to community living. Her experience focused on the survival of her son during internment and reuniting with her husband after the war. Her explanation of the brutality of the Japanese towards the women is more confronting than the nurses' accounts, as is Jann Ruff O'Herne's book *Fifty years of silence* (1994), in which she discusses in detail the horror of her time as a comfort woman for the Japanese. This story was published in 2008 after both of her parents had died and she no longer felt shame about telling her story. O'Herne was not in the same internment camp as the *Vyner Brooke* nurses. Historian Christina Twomey's book *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners – Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (2007), tells another aspect of the war experience through the stories of civilians and is similar to writing about the *Vyner Brooke* nurses as it adds different perspectives to the collective war memory.

Women's Autobiography Theory

The *Women, Autobiography, Theory a reader* (1998), edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, focuses on the application of the Women's Autobiography

Theory through the revisiting of women's diaries and autobiographies. It places the marginalised other, women, at the forefront of their own works and what it means when discussing this from a historical perspective⁴. This work explains how Women's Autobiography Theory can be applied to female-authored literature and how, by placing relevance on it, a new concept of women's history can be voiced. This text concentrates on women's literature around the world, and discusses the concepts of class, race and political history. While it addresses the marginalisation of women in history and the importance of female-authored literature, it does not specifically interrogate Australian war history or the experience of nurses during World War II.

The Private Self (1988) edited by Shari Benstock is another text, which focuses on the relevance of autobiographies and revisiting history through a female voice. This literature concentrates on work by authors like Simone de Beauvoir and Jane Austen, but is not focused on the Australian history centred on women. *The female autograph* (1984), edited by Domna C Stanton, explored how women are represented in literature through female spirituality and selfhood. It gives further context to the Women's Autobiography Theory by placing women at the centre of their authored literature, but is not specifically applied to Australian history or literature. Women's Autobiography theory will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

The range of primary and secondary sources, which includes reference to the *Vyner Brooke* nurses, is employed to create an historic framework of the events. Each author has a specific aim, whether it is retelling the events as they happened or explaining the history retrospectively, many years after the events have taken place. This thesis, however, will concentrate on the relationship between the women and whether this camaraderie helped to focus their endurance and resourcefulness to survive internment and return to Australia.

⁴ Higonet, *Behind the Lines*, 38

Thesis Outline

Following on from the previous chapter, the second chapter of the thesis focuses on Women's Autobiography theory and analyses why rewriting female stories into history is specifically important for adding context from a female perspective. It also addresses some of the issues with archival research. The third chapter provides an overview of the history of nursing, commencing with the changes enacted in England by Florence Nightingale after her work in the Crimean War (1853 – 1856). It discusses Lucy Osburn bringing this nursing system to Australia and implementing it at the Sydney Infirmary after her training at Nightingale's St Thomas' School in London. It explores the spread of the Nightingale trained nurses throughout Australia after Osburn's arrival. The history as it relates to the *Vyner Brooke* nurses is discussed in the fourth chapter. This chapter focuses on the specific nursing requirements of the women who enlisted in World War Two and follows the movements of the Australian nurses from Singapore until their imprisonment.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ethos of the Australian women and how their training under the living-in system helped to solidify the group during internment. It discusses their work ethic and patient-first mentality defined by this nursing training. The chapter includes references to their ethos as part of the Australian Army and their sustained patriotism to Australia. Camaraderie (or the female version of 'mateship') is explored in Chapter 6, including how this kinship amongst the nurses became a tactic of survival, as they were able to rely on one another. Chapter 7 explains the resourcefulness of the group and how their specific money making schemes generated income and became a way to remain productive while imprisoned. The final chapter draws together all of the points made throughout the work and concludes the argument presented.

CHAPTER 2

“...military nurses did fight battles - nursing ones”¹

Australian military history is built upon the stories of men and their heroic deeds. Marking the 25th of April as the birth of Australian nationhood confirms this as “ANZAC day has reinforced the identity of men as nation builders and, in the process, become, ‘a vehicle for perpetuating the subordination of women in Australian culture’”². This results in Australian participation in the wars being remembered as a narrative of national consciousness³. Australian history, from settlement until after the mid-20th century, was interpreted largely as a narrative of men’s achievement whether in peace or in war. Women were marginalised, along with Indigenous Australians and ethnic minorities. While the increased numbers of female scholars in University History programmes post 1970 and the development of social history as a discipline began to change the focus of peacetime history, the record of Australians at war remains largely an account of male activity and achievement, with women confined to home front narratives. The Australian soldiers who went to war in 1914 were part of a mateship ethos that had been fostered in the anti-authoritarian atmosphere of the gold fields in the latter half of the 19th century. The history of these diggers focused upon their ties with other Anglo-Saxon men and in doing so marginalised the stories of non-British immigrants, women and Indigenous Australians. The masculinisation of Australian culture was further established through the ideology of the Bushman and all he stood for in taming the Australian outback. In their study of gender and war, Lake and Damousi have drawn attention to the manner in which, particularly since the publication of Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, Australian literature has fallen into a gendered pattern of celebrating masculinity as the focus of nationalistic mythology. Australian nationalistic mythology has become gendered by focussing on masculinity⁴.

The recent study of women’s writing in their biographies, letters, journals and in this thesis through their autobiographies, allows a view of history from a female perspective. Joan W Scott explains that historians have “...begun to ask

¹ Kirsty Harris, *More than bombs and bandages: Australian Army nurses at work in World War I*, (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2011), 7

² Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake, edit. *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 306

³ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 119

⁴ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 7. Ward, *The Australian Legend*. Dyrenfurth, *Mateship: A very Australian History*, (Melbourne: Scribe, 2015)

what their new information about women can tell us about events and processes that have traditionally preoccupied historians”⁵. The literature written by women was previously a “...mode of writing traditionally considered marginal [and] generically inferior”⁶. By focusing on the female perspective, relevance is placed on the work written by and about women, giving importance to their recollection of events. This theory becomes relevant when reassessing Australian military history, which is predominantly focused on the masculine experience. Reviewing female-authored literature, therefore, allows the unspeakable to have a voice, as a woman’s marginality is unnameable in the parameters of the dominant culture⁷.

Women’s writing has been considered part of the private sphere where they could record details of their daily lives. This concept of the private suggests an area of writing that invites women into a separate space between other writing and autobiographies and it reinforces the gender divide between the masculine and feminine⁸. This form of writing would “...affirm that women could not transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self; thus, it had effectively served to devalue their writing”⁹. In the nineteenth century female-authored literature was deemed insignificant by the literary world and so women’s writing was restricted to this private and personal world. As this work by female authors was rarely published, the private form of writing became one of the ways they could detail their own existence. For the published literature written by women it became “...clear to many feminist critics that academic scholars were complicit in [the] broader cultural practices that valued women’s writing only in terms of, and as the ‘other’ of, men’s writing”¹⁰. The focus on the female perspective gives importance to the literature by women, rather than concentrating on literary forms written by men and their representation of cultural production¹¹.

Australian historians of World War One created a mythological archetype of the Australian soldier, with the characteristics of stoicism, courage, larrikinism

⁵ Margaret Higonnet, edit. *Behind the lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), page 22

⁶ Domna C. Stanton, edit. *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1984), 3

⁷ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 1998), 393

⁸ Shari Benstock, edit. *The Private Self* (USA: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1

⁹ Stanton, *The Female Autograph*, 4

¹⁰ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 8

¹¹ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 32

and bravery to live or die for his country¹². Upon the soldiers' return, the ANZAC legend became idealised and the individual soldier became mythologised¹³. After the conclusion of World War I, returning men were heralded as heroes and given a national day of remembrance, whereas women received little commendation¹⁴. In her book *Kitty's War*, Janet Butler highlights this discrepancy. Her work is focused on the Australian World War I nurse Kit McNaughton and she quotes the following diary entry:

A soldier's return to Werribee district receives a fanfare in the *Werribee Shire Banner*, which reports of the fire bell being rung to announce their imminent arrival at the station, the night's moving picture show being suspended at the Mechanics Hall as patrons flood to the welcome, and speech given after he alights¹⁵.

The return of Kit is very different to that of the men:

As there had been no announcement of Kit's going to war, despite the fact that it was at the end of a recruitment drive, nor any reporting of a farewell, there is no announcement of Kit's return...or of any celebration taking place to welcome and valorise her, either as she steps off the train or, later, in her home town¹⁶.

The men who enlisted for the World War Two did so living in this myth-making ideology, raised in an Australian society, which historically focused on the masculine experience of war:

Much has been written about the gender bias of ANZAC mythology with its celebration of an archetypal warrior masculinity, characterised by bravery and nobility of sacrifice, male bonding and eroticism of the flirtation with death. When Australia went to war in September 1939, they were proudly aware of their inheritance¹⁷.

¹² Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 119. Charles Bean deliberately crafted this mythology of the World War One Digger – Graham Seal, *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 7. See also Lindsay, *The Spirit of the Digger*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan 2011) 17.

¹³ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 38

¹⁴ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 303

¹⁵ Janet Butler, *Kitty's War: The remarkable wartime experiences of Kit McNaughton*, (St Lucia: The University of Queensland Press, 2013), 218

¹⁶ Butler, *Kitty's War*, 218

¹⁷ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 119

The nurses who enlisted in World War Two acknowledged and lived by this ideology of the Australian digger. Their contribution was to help 'the boys' in their battle. Their history centred on their treatment of patients and for the prisoner of war nurses it was their guilt at leaving the wounded men behind when they were forced to evacuate, rather than their own experience of war and imprisonment, that took precedence. This sentiment is reiterated at the end of the war when the nurses were reunited with the Australian soldiers they had nursed. Even though both combatants and non-combatants shared the POW experience, the male stories were prioritised as defining the wartime experience.

The masculinisation of Australian war time history means that it focuses on the major events that involved men; the inclusion of literature written by women can redirect the attention from the large scale political events to the social history and the everyday practices of subjects¹⁸. Professor Joan W Scott wrote that:

Women's experience, when contrasted with official pronouncements on the meaning of war, provides insight not only into the discrepancy between domestic, private history and official, national history, but also (and more important) a means of analysing how and by whom national memory is constructed¹⁹

As the women's prisoner of war experience was related by themselves and there were not male witnesses to most of it, their experience was marginalised because it was about women²⁰. A focus on the history of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses describes both the ordinary and the extraordinary²¹. The nurses were able to record their nursing experience during the war, but their work is distinctive because it records these unusual events in terms that are familiar and habitual. In the diaries the nurses recorded how they cooked meals together and made birthday and Christmas presents for each other, thereby continuing to function as they would in Australia, despite the circumstances they were now living in. This thesis argues that their ethos and camaraderie were products of their pre-war training, which helped to normalise the events

¹⁸ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 6

¹⁹ Higgonnet, *Behind the Lines*, 28

²⁰ Higgonnet, *Behind the Lines*, 47

²¹ Shari Benstock, edit, *The Private Self*, (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 152

they were recording. The inclusion of women's accounts in history therefore challenges the ownership of history and allows a number of different perspective and understandings of these events to be represented.

The reading of the historical events of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses is one based on gender. While a female perspective of history does take into account race, class and other constructions, this thesis looks specifically at the circumstances of the Australian women and how history has marginalised their experience because of the patriarchal conventions they lived under. The constructions of identity in their memoirs "...provides a spectrum of gendered identity within a range of meanings that is circumscribed by the culture in which it is embedded²². The self or the construction of these women in their literature is produced by a specific social process and discourse²³. The histories are contextualised and the events are related through a system of ideologies defined by the patriarchal society in which the women lived. The constructions of the individuals in their stories is "...as subjects through language, but individual subjects and rather than being the source of their own self-generated and self-expressive meaning – adopt[ing] positions available within the language at a given moment"²⁴. They process their contribution through this historical context.

Even though this group of women as prisoners of war lived in an information vacuum, they returned to a masculinised society and negotiated their own stories through this system. This is important in understanding how the women present themselves in their works. According to Smith and Watson:

To read women's autobiographical texts is to attend to the historically and culturally specific discourses of identity through which women became speaking subjects...the forms of self-representation available to women at particular historical moments, the meaning they make of their experiential histories...as sites for the re/production of knowledge²⁵.

The writing of women into history is not a combative response to the patriarchal histories already in place; alternatively, it is placing the stories of

²² Benstock, *The Private Self*, 167

²³ Benstock, *The Private Self*, 149

²⁴ Benstock, *The Private Self*, 149

²⁵ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 22

women alongside those of men²⁶. It highlights the extraordinary and important work they undertook for the war effort and makes formerly invisible subjects visible²⁷. It has become the:

...mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past. It has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories²⁸.

Revisiting the nurses' historical accounts of events, discussing their endurance and the tactics of survival employed through their resourcefulness increases our understanding of Australians' wartime experiences. Historian Jan Bassett argued that, "Australian historians have either ignored or sanctified the experiences of the army nurses...Nor have army nurses fared well at the hands of official historians..."²⁹ Focusing on the stories of women from the war in an historical context means that those who have previously been overlooked or omitted in the accounts now have a voice.

The female contribution to the war effort and especially that of the nurses is often referred to in the soldiers' own accounts and in official documents, but their actual contribution is marginalised. The nurses have "...not figured significantly in Australia's remembering of the war... [and they are] marginal to the 'real' meaning of the war – the 'discovery of Australian manhood'..."³⁰ In their memoirs, the nurses deliberately directed attention away from detailing their own horror of internment and, alternatively, they would highlight their camaraderie or stoicism in the face of danger³¹. The definition of women in warfare meant that they were "...defined as passive flesh, naturally weak, outside history, irrelevant to the making of nations, yet needed, like nurses at the front to keep the military machine functioning or home fires burning"³². The marginalisation of the nurses' stories confirms that the war was a

²⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/australia-culture-blog/2014/apr/30/clare-wright-stella-prize-forgotten-rebels-of-eureka> - Site accessed 15/05/2015

²⁷ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 5. See also Higgonnet, *Behind GenderLines*, 22 and 25

²⁸ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 58

²⁹ Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1992), 1

³⁰ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 43

³¹ Harris, *More than bombs*, 8

³² Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 3

masculine domain and that the sacrifices of the women were not as noteworthy as those involving heroic manhood³³. It is only by recognising the importance of their work and, through this, the role they played in the war that their contribution can be adequately acknowledged.

The diary was a form of writing used by several of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses to record their experiences. Betty Jeffrey and Jean Ashton wrote during internment describing the events as they happened. At the conclusion of the War, in her diary entry of the 27 August 1945, Jeffrey wrote that:

I have written this diary spasmodically for three and a half years, but now it is written almost hourly because good things are happening so quickly. Hell has turned into heaven almost overnight. Thank goodness the diary does not have to be hidden anymore, it looks like a wreck³⁴.

Shari Benstock stated that, “such writings serve as a means by which to create images of ‘self’ through the writing act, a way by which to find a ‘voice’ – whether private or public – through which to express that which cannot be expressed in other forms”³⁵. The diary itself is fragmented with a depiction of life as it occurs, rather than following a specific literary format. The author writes the work with an uncertainty to its conclusion as this is mediated by external factors³⁶. It gives a first-hand account of the thoughts and events, which are frozen in the written word³⁷. Historian Katie Holmes, writing about World War I nurses, stated that the:

Diaries were less subject to an extreme censor although they convey a strong sense of future audience. Nurses often mentioned keeping diaries to record the things they couldn’t put in letters, and they were freer there to represent themselves without the need to explain or translate. Diaries reflect the nurses’ coming to terms with war. They charted change³⁸.

This applies to the diaries written by World War II nurses, too, and it is through the reading of the diaries that a revision of women’s life issues in this historical

³³ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 50

³⁴ Betty Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, (Pymble: Harper Collins Publishers, 1954), 188

³⁵ Benstock, *The Private Self*, 5

³⁶ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 86

³⁷ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 69

³⁸ Katie Holmes, “Day mothers and night sisters: World War 1 nurses and sexuality”, *Gender and war*, 45

context can occur³⁹. The publication of many female-authored diaries coincides with changing attitudes over time and the value placed on women's narrative. Jean Ashton's diary, published in 2003, served to help her family understand her prisoner of war experience⁴⁰:

We all knew Aunty Jean had been a prisoner of war. We all knew she marched every ANZAC day. But she didn't talk about her experiences until the later years of her life. This diary brings to life the story of the hardships, the fun, and the struggle to keep body and soul together. It's a story we are proud to publish for others to read⁴¹.

This acknowledgement by Ashton's family confirms to the reader the importance of, and pride in, the work.

Why are these stories relevant?

The gender bias of Australian military history, which focuses on the masculine, is why reviewing the stories of the nurses is so important. In particular, the emphasis on the masculine is inaccurate because it devalues the female contribution to Australian wartime experience. As Jan Bassett observed, "Australian army nurses have a history of being 'in but not of' the army. The main reason has been their gender. Until 1941 they and a small number of masseuses (or physiotherapists) were the only women in the Australian Army"⁴². The experiences of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses in World War II add to a diverse range of stories about the Australian involvement⁴³. They add further context to Australian history as the nurses' impact on the war has previously been diminished because of their gender. As the marginalised other in the context of the war, the memoirs become an important research tool because females are the focus of these written texts. They describe their own experiences with themselves as the central characters⁴⁴. The female authors of these texts can "...seek to authenticate themselves in stories that reveal 'a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding', employing understatement to mask their feelings and play

³⁹ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 5

⁴⁰ Jean Ashton, *Jean's Diary: A POW Diary 1942 -1945*, (Adelaide: Published by Jill Ashton, 2003) preface

⁴¹ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, ii

⁴² Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 2

⁴³ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 5

⁴⁴ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 50

down public aspects of their lives”⁴⁵. The *Vyner Brooke* nurses often employ this use of understatement, they seek an understanding of their own experience through the collective memory, yet at the same time downplay the horror they experienced.

The nurses themselves were thwarted in the telling of their own stories. Their families were advised when they returned from the camp not to discuss their imprisonment and that, alternatively, focusing on the nurses’ return would help to settle the women back into their previous lives⁴⁶. And so, information that may have been recorded immediately after their return was not revealed out of their families’ concern for their health. The nurses listened to stories of the difficulties of life in Australia for their families rather than being able to communicate the impact of their imprisonment and war experience⁴⁷. This diminished the magnitude of their own stories in relation to their families. As communicating with the outside world about their war stories became problematic, the nurses communicated with each other through shared language and developed an understanding of their experience, which became foreign to their families⁴⁸. In an interview Florence Trotter stated that:

When we returned from the war, it was very difficult to return to normal life, to begin again where we had left off, because those who had not been involved could not possibly understand what we had been through... So we only talked about our experiences amongst ourselves⁴⁹.

In her exploration of the history of Australian World War I nurses, Kirsty Harris discovered that, “The silence of military nurses and their marginalisation by historians serve not only to conceal the nature of their work, but aspects of the very nature of war itself”⁵⁰. The instrumental role, therefore, focusing on literature written by and about women is to give a voice to previously silenced people⁵¹. The *Vyner Brooke* nurses became a silenced group through their pacts with one another, their removal from society during their time as

⁴⁵ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 9

⁴⁶ Wilma Oram interview transcript with Barb Angell 27th December 1997, page 33

⁴⁷ Catherine Kenny, *Captives: Australian Army Nurses in Japanese Prison Camps*, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986), 157

⁴⁸ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 45

⁴⁹ Florence Trotter interview transcript “We too were there” – first published by the Returned Sisters Sub Branch R & SLA (Queensland), page 12. See also Higonnet, *Behind the Lines*, 27

⁵⁰ Harris, *More than bombs*, 2

⁵¹ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 25

prisoners of war, and in peacetime as women marginalised apart from the stories of men. The freedom gained in writing their own accounts meant that women were not bound to produce a coherent and consistent self, developed from their daily experience⁵². During internment this meant they were able to write their stories, which gave value to that which was unsaid⁵³. The inclusion of women's stories means that, "in seeking to add women to the fund of historical knowledge, women's history has revitalised theory, for it has shaken the conceptual formulations of historical study... "⁵⁴.

When interviewed as an older woman, Wilma Oram explained that their experiences and that of civilian women should be included in the history of the prisoners of war:

I do think it should be rectified. I know the men had a horrific time. But the women and children have not had the same recognition that they had a horrific time too. The women and children suffered great deprivation. It was very hard for them⁵⁵.

The regulations placed on the Australian women in their nurse training and as part of the Armed forces meant that they followed a specific work ethos, focusing on their patients' needs before their own. The indoctrination of the nurses through their living-in training meant that even while imprisoned they continued to follow this work ethos. The contribution of this group of prisoner of war nurses to the war effort differed from that of other Australian nurses who served in the war, but who did not suffer imprisonment⁵⁶. From early in 1942, their war experience did not focus on saving lives of the Australian soldiers because they were unable to. Consequently, the recollection of their wartime experience differs from other nurses' memoirs and adds another perspective to those already in place about war nursing. The literature written about their imprisonment highlights the fortitude and ability of the Australian women. The writing of their memoirs, as Sidonie Smith argued more broadly,

⁵² Benstock, *The Private Self*, 154

⁵³ Benstock, *The Private Self*, 154

⁵⁴ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 456

⁵⁵ Wilma Oram interview transcripts, page 17

⁵⁶ Another group of Australian nurses were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese from Rabaul, New Britain. They refused to desert their patients and surrendered the hospital to the Japanese after invasion. While their experience was similar to that of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses, living on little rations, with no access to medicine and had no communication with family, they were eventually taken from Rabaul and interned in Japan with other civilian prisoners (Kenny, *Captives*, 101)

can work to explore “...the relationship between subjectivity and autobiographical practice posing questions about how women, excluded from official discourse, use autobiography to ‘talk back’, to embody subjectivity and to inhabit and infect a range of subjective ‘I’s”⁵⁷.

The concept of what it meant to be an Australian man in the war was an heroic ideal created by influential wartime commentators such as Charles Bean⁵⁸. For the new nation, which had achieved Federation only in 1901, World War I and the constructions of manhood helped to develop a specific character and ideological understanding of what it meant to be an Australian man⁵⁹. The Australian nurses were deliberately excluded from this understanding of warfare and from this concept of mateship because of their gender. Words like ‘kinship’ and ‘camaraderie’ can be used when discussing the friendships of the women, but not the word that has become synonymous with Australian men during wartime – mateship. For the nurses, however, this exclusion from the concept of ‘mateship’ meant that there were not strict parameters on what their friendships meant and what specific characteristics were required to be included within the ethos of this group.

Sanitisation and Saintliness

With an historic thesis there are problems that have to be negotiated when using archival research. The *Vyner Brooke* nurses’ recollections of the events are written over a time period of nearly seventy years. The time gap between the events occurring and the stories written later in life presents problems because, while there is an audience willing to accept the nurses’ accounts of their imprisonment, events and important information can be forgotten or sanitised. Jeffrey’s diary was published as the book *White Coolies* and not released until 1953, eight years after she had been repatriated to Australia. While this was early compared to other publications it shows that, even less than a decade after the war, some censorship was employed. In the final edit of her work a derogatory comment she had made about the sisters living together had been deliberately removed:

When I get out of here, heaven preserve me from nagging women, what absolute bliss to be able to be alone for a couple of hours; to be able to

⁵⁷ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 16

⁵⁸ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 141

⁵⁹ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 302

sit down and not hear “that’s my chair” or “can I have that box you are sitting on” or “I want that small table, hurry up” – why can’t a girl sit down in peace and build a Mah Jong set...however, I’ll try again tomorrow – being Tuesday it’s my turn for the chair⁶⁰.

Kenny credits this deliberate sanitisation as indicative of the protective attitude the women had for each other⁶¹. After a difficult experience in the camp Jeffrey wrote, “The next week was too awful to write about...” deliberately excluding detail from the reader⁶².

But the most contentious issue was that of the nurses being used as ‘comfort women’. There are reports that later in life some of the nurses did reveal events formerly withheld by the group. The pact of silence the group agreed upon merely perpetuated the sanitisation of the events, as certain aspects were deliberately excluded from the writing. As Bell Hooks acknowledges, “The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling [it] is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release”⁶³. Their collective silence and the deliberate act of not revealing all the details hamper the discovery of new information surrounding these events and a full understanding of the horrors of their imprisonment. In *Victoria’s Living Memorial*, Williams explains that when she was interviewing the *Vyner Brooke* nurses, “there [was] often reluctance to volunteer information about contemporaries either living or dead, lest in some way they offend”⁶⁴. This is one of the difficulties associated with including memoirs or memories about historical events, as over time they can be changed or parts forgotten.

Another difficulty when researching these stories is that the institution of nursing itself helps to inhibit the flow of information. Through the training and the Nightingale-inspired concept of vocation, the women maintained the virtues associated with nursing. The reverence shown to the nurses after their evacuation in 1945 is displayed in the photographs taken in Singapore Hospital when they were recuperating. One of their rescuers, Ken Brown, stated that,

⁶⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, 67

⁶¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 67

⁶² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 33

⁶³ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 431

⁶⁴ Jennifer Williams, *Victoria’s living Memorial: History of the Nurses Memorial Centre 1948- 1990*, (Melbourne: Nurses Memorial Centre, 1991), xvi

“None of us had ever seen people in this kind of condition. And by the time photographs appeared in newspapers, of course, they’d been helped and fed”⁶⁵. In *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners*, Christina Twomey writes that,

Photographs of the emaciated and semi-naked bodies of POWs have become emblematic images of the experience of Allied Soldiers captured by the Japanese in World War Two. In Australia, the Burma-Thailand railway has become its defining story (Appendix 7, figure 28 and 29)⁶⁶.

Twomey goes on to explain that the photos of the women, however, are taken in Singapore Hospital after receiving medical treatment. The women have showered and bathed and are wearing clean clothes, though their skeletal frames are still evident (Appendix 7, figure 25, 26 and 27). The women were photographed, not as they were upon release, but surrounded by emblems associated with womanhood – flowers and fruits – all symbols of female vitality. “Nearly all of the photographs of released nurses show them in dainty cotton nightgowns, being visited by soldiers or selecting luscious tropical fruits from attractive cane baskets”⁶⁷.

The time delay in researching an event 70 years after its conclusion, therefore, can be problematic as not only are the stories potentially sanitised by the women themselves, but also by people who wrote and edited their memoirs. While, with the change in time and attitude towards warfare, there is more information available, including access to Japanese archives, it does not change the potential sanitisation of these specific stories. Hence, the sexual threat to the female internees is represented as covert rather than confronting, it is voyeuristic rather than physical. The torture they write about was through the deliberate restriction of food and medicine. Any physical abuse by their captors is often referred to simplistically rather than being graphically described. Alternatively, civilian stories describe their hardship in detail. These people were caught up in the war and imprisoned, not a set of ‘ministering angels’ impervious to a similar level of mistreatment. Agnes Keith, a civilian internee who was taken prisoner in Borneo, described in detail an altercation with the Japanese:

⁶⁵ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 29

⁶⁶ Christina Twomey, *Australia’s Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two*, (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007), introduction.

⁶⁷ Christina Twomey, “Australian Nurse POWs, gender, war and captivity”, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 36, Issue 124, 2004, page 260.

They shouted, and struck me, and when I stood up they pushed me roughly down and struck me again and again. Then they left. I went upstairs to bed, shaking. I became very ill. I was pregnant at that time. That afternoon I had a miscarriage. We lived like this for four months. You do not die when such things happen. They are not killing matters. In warfare, they aren't even serious ones⁶⁸.

Throughout her book, Keith frankly described the hardship of her internment with her young son and the physical abuse by their Japanese captors. Civilian authors of memoirs were not limited by a nursing ethos that focused on the good of the patient and camaraderie between colleagues. They were individuals enduring an experience, rather than a group who had allegiance to each other and were therefore more frank in their writing.

Another limitation of writing about any prisoners of war is that there is little correspondence with family and friends, which would give further insight into the internees' living conditions and their mental state at that time. Even the letters written before the evacuation of Singapore were sanitised as the nurses "...tried to minimise their peril to those back home, who cared and would be worried"⁶⁹. Apart from a few contemporary diaries, all other sources reflect on the events after the war had concluded and often rely on secondary resources such as biographies, transcripts and interviews with people who knew the nurses and their story.

The Radji Beach Massacre is a particularly difficult subject for study because the only surviving witness to the event was Vivian Bullwinkel. Had Bullwinkel not survived the attack, the history from the nurses' perspective would have been lost completely. Some of the soldiers who survived the bayonetting prior to the nurses being walked into the water at Radji Beach wrote their own accounts, but they did not witness the shooting. Without another source the course of events is left entirely to Bullwinkel's memory and what she chose to disclose. Bullwinkel died in 2000 and so all reflections about the events are confined to these previous sources. Norman Manners, who authored the biography *Bullwinkel*, was approached to provide transcripts of his interviews with Vivian, he declined saying that the information was to go to the Australian War Memorial after his death. With this information new aspects of the story

⁶⁸ Agnes Keith, *Three Came Home*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1948), 35

⁶⁹ Ian Shaw, *On Radji Beach: The story of the Australian nurses after the fall of Singapore*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2010), 100

of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses may come to light. In the interim, however, as indicated by the fact that a number of the memoirs discussed how the nurses maintained a code of silence about this event, the story may have been deliberately distorted to ensure the memory of the sisters who died was upheld as virtuous. Phyllis Pugh, a member of the 2/14th AGH who nursed the women when they returned to Singapore Hospital after the war, stated in an interview as an older woman that at the time “...the surviving nurses talked non-stop of their life in P.O.W. camps. Now they do not mention it”.⁷⁰

More recently researchers, writing at a time when attitudes to war and to victims of rape have changed, have sought to uncover the full story of what happened at Bangka Island and afterwards in the prison camps. In an appendix to her book *A Woman's War*, Barb Angell suggested, as a result of her own research regarding the Bangka Island Massacre, that Japanese soldiers raped the women before they were massacred. Her investigation concluded that the entry and exit bullet holes on Vivian Bullwinkel's dress are evidence that her dress was open as she walked into the sea at Radji Beach. Angell stated that:

At no time did any of the PoW nurses break what I shall term the “code of silence” mentioned in “A Woman's War” regarding the Bangka Island massacre, nor did they break silence about any other incidents that occurred as part of the women's period of internment, and about which they seem to have agreed not to speak⁷¹.

Angell stated that her investigation is not to “cause mischief”, but that she wanted the story of the Japanese savagery to be exposed⁷². In using these words, despite the gravity of the claim she is making, Angell sought to preserve the sanitisation out of respect for the nurses, waiting until after Oram's death to release this theory. She stated that, “I believe the evidence that I have presented... supports my theory, that Vivian told the truth - except she omitted the rape. I believe that she did not lie, she just did not give a complete account”⁷³. As yet, Angell has been unable to publish the appendix to her history, as the publisher will not run another print of the book. If the women were raped and tortured before they were killed on Radji Beach there is no

⁷⁰ Lex Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital: 8th Division A.I.F., Malaya, 2009* – unpublished, 122

⁷¹ Barb Angell, *Appendix “A Hypothesis concerning the Bangka Island Massacre”* - unpublished, 1

⁷² Angell, *Appendix A hypothesis*, 2

⁷³ Angell, *Appendix A hypothesis*, 14

mention of it in any of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses' memoirs or other re-telling of the event⁷⁴.

Historian Ian Shaw, in the postscript to *On Radji Beach*, also alludes to the possibility of rape. His supposition is based on the previous actions of the captain of the 229th Regiment of the 38th Division of the Imperial Japanese Army, Orita Masaru, who possibly gave the orders for the massacre⁷⁵. Shaw stated that, "It seems likely that Orita had been directly in charge of the soldiers who raped and murdered their way through St Stephen's Hospital in Hong Kong..."⁷⁶ The attack on the hospital in Hong Kong had been one of the motivating reasons for the evacuation of the Australian nurses from Singapore⁷⁷.

As mentioned above, a survivor of the Japanese prison camps, Jann Ruff-O'Herne finally revealed her experiences of sexual abuse as a prisoner of war. Ruff-O'Herne, a civilian interned in Indonesia, was forced to become a comfort woman to the Japanese soldiers. Her book *Fifty years of silence: the extraordinary memoir of a war rape survivor* was first published in 1994. She had kept the story from her friends and family because she considered it to be too horrific and shameful to be told⁷⁸. The story also involved other women and even though they were victims, they felt shame because of their experience. In recounting these events, however, she respected the privacy of the others who became comfort women, as she did not reveal their names⁷⁹. It was only when she learned of other comfort women coming forward that she could tell her own story. For O'Herne, these women, "...did not return from war like heroes, wearing their medals. They came back wearing their scars"⁸⁰.

⁷⁴ Pat Darling (nee Gunther), *Portrait of a Nurse: Prisoner of War of the Japanese 1942 -1945 Sumatra*, (Mona Vale: Don Wall, 2001). Jeffrey, *White Coolies*. Barbara Angell, *A Woman's War*, (Sydney: New Holland, 2003). Norman G. Manners, *Bullwinkel: The true story of Vivian Bullwinkel, a young Army Nursing Sister who was the sole survivor of a World War Two massacre by the Japanese*, (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 2008). Jessie Elizabeth Simons, *While history passed: The Story of the Australian Nurses who were prisoners of the Japanese for three and a half years*, (Melbourne: William Heinemann Ltd, 1954). Ashton, *Jean's Diary*.

⁷⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 319

⁷⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 319

⁷⁷ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 2. See also Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 75

⁷⁸ Jan Ruff-O'Herne, *Fifty years of silence: The extraordinary memoir of a war rape survivor*, (North Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 4

⁷⁹ Ruff-O'Herne, *Fifty years of silence*, 80

⁸⁰ Ruff-O'Herne, *Fifty years of silence*, 167

In the light of experiences revealed by civilian women, therefore, it may be posited that the nurses, through their loyalty to one another, deliberately excluded any confirmation of the true horror of internment. "Their personal itineraries, which have taken them through struggle, interrogation, incarceration and, in many cases, physical torture, are attested to in their own narratives as part of a historical agenda, a collective enterprise"⁸¹. This suggests that the women saw their identity through the group rather than as individuals⁸². The group loyalty and camaraderie became part of their strategy of survival and so their memory was selective and coloured by their group allegiance, even though their writings were individual. They created a solidarity and developed an alternative way of seeing themselves based on the group identity, which grows through the historical experiences⁸³.

The last of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses died in 2007 and so, being unable to interview the women directly means a reliance on their stories as recorded in published or unpublished works by themselves, family members or other authors. These works have been edited to suit societal conventions at the time they were written. Feminist autobiography theorist Margo Culley claims that this form of self-censorship is imperative to this style of writing. They have observed:

The importance of the audience, real or implied, conscious or unconscious, or what is usually thought of as a private genre cannot be overstated. The presence of a sense of audience, in this form of writing as in all others, has a crucial influence over what is said and how it is said...It shapes the selection and arrangement of detail within the journal and determines more than anything else the kind of self-constructions the diarist presents⁸⁴.

Unless new evidence comes to light, any further exploration of the lives of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses can be based only on the resource material available. Without being able to discuss directly with the women the events and their time in internment, interpretation has to be based on the works of others, yet,

⁸¹ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 455

⁸² Benstock, *The Private Self*, 274

⁸³ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 218

⁸⁴ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 218

“While the nurses’ recollections may be coloured by experience and memory, they are no less valuable...”⁸⁵.

Self-censorship is used in the literature to divert attention away from what the Australian nurses considered inappropriate⁸⁶. The nurses admitted deliberately leaving out parts of their stories. Jessie Simons wrote that:

There are many things about which I have kept silence in this book. For one thing, I cannot recall everything in its right setting; there are other things I have left out intentionally. I hope I have not misrepresented anyone or omitted anything which is important to the story⁸⁷.

In *Jean’s Diary* there is a note in the preface to explain the structure of the diary to the reader,

The words and abbreviations are exactly as Jean wrote, with the editor’s notes in italics. A note from Jean explains the blank spaces are parts she rubbed out, containing certain news or incidents which if read by the guards would have probably led to punishment to herself or others⁸⁸.

Thus, Ashton self-censored her own diary in the internment camp to ensure there was no retribution for her written words. In a letter that Pat Gunther wrote to her family during internment, which was sanctioned by the Japanese guards, but heavily edited by them, she included the statement, “I have not been raped, bashed or tortured” – an apparent assurance that the women were safe and not mistreated by the Japanese⁸⁹. Betty Jeffrey explained in her diary that she “couldn’t write about this period: it has been too awful, one or two funerals every day and so many young people are dying”⁹⁰. This statement indicates that she deliberately left traumatic events out of her diary.

The Australian nurses may have suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) when they returned to Australia, although this condition is not described in any of their biographies. PTSD occurs when a person is overwhelmingly traumatised by an event and re-experiences the event, causing feelings of fear, horror, helplessness and avoidance of anything that is

⁸⁵ Harris, *More than bombs*, 12

⁸⁶ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 134

⁸⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, ix

⁸⁸ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, preface

⁸⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 277

⁹⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 146

associated with the trauma⁹¹. Angell makes mention of this in her appendix in relation to Vivian Bullwinkel, whom she knew personally: “There can be no doubt that Vivian was severely traumatised by her personal experience, even if she did not appear so. As a symptom of her post-traumatic stress, she might suffer from selective amnesia, or denial, or both”⁹². In *A Woman’s War*, Angell described times when Oram, during interviews, would revert into a memory, thereby safeguarding herself from the discussion of a difficult situation, a technique she had developed in the camps. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while the nurses worked as a collective and continued to view themselves as one solidified group, catching up often after the war, these meetings were also fraught with difficulties. These catch-ups sometimes triggered recollections of experiences during internment, which would evoke a post-traumatic response and cause the individual nightmares and sleeplessness. Such reactions, which are symptomatic of PTSD, are not detailed in their memoirs and are not included in the picture they paint of a solidified group during and after internment. Kenny mentions that, “Years later they still have nightmares of captivity”, but she is discussing the group rather than relating this to any individual nurse⁹³.

The study of the *Vyner Brooke Nurses* is one of endurance, group solidarity and commitment against the horrors of internment. Regardless whether the literature upon which this thesis is based is sanitised, it is significant in representing female perspectives of the experiences of prisoner of war nurses. Their fortitude and their loyalty to one another, even in the retelling of these events, demonstrates their continued camaraderie.

While both World War I and World War II created career opportunities for the nurses and provided an environment in which they could travel, the War still remained a gendered activity⁹⁴. Margaret R. Higgonnet and Patrice L.R Higgonnet in their work “The Double Helix” explain that, “...in the military, women were generally treated as auxiliaries and reserves, assigned to the “feminine” medical and communication duties or symbolically located at the rear of combat zones”⁹⁵. Therefore studying the letters, diaries,

⁹¹ *The Merck Manual, Seventh Edition* – Published by Merck Research Laboratories, NJ 1999, 1517

⁹² Angell, *Appendix A hypothesis*, 13

⁹³ Kenny, *Captives*, 153

⁹⁴ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 67

⁹⁵ Higgonnet, edit. *Behind the lines*, 35

autobiographies and memoirs of the nurses and revaluing their experience becomes important in explaining why the reinvestigation of women's stories are imperative to the study of Australia's war history. The military institution has been regarded in Western culture as the area in which patriarchal values and practices dominate⁹⁶. After the conclusion of the war, Australian society regarded the patriarchal dominance as "the norm" and so the nurses failed to value their own participation⁹⁷. The experiences of the nurses in war, firstly as AANS nurses in Singapore, through their efforts in saving civilian lives during the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, protecting their honour on Radji Beach, their camaraderie and resourcefulness during internment combine to give a female perspective of the war for women on active service during World War II. Without the study and inclusion of their contribution and their steadfast determination to survive the horrors of war, the full story of the war effort for Australians remains incomplete⁹⁸. The reading of the literature begins to re-evaluate the place of women in Australian society and their own contribution to the war effort⁹⁹.

⁹⁶ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and war*, 11

⁹⁷ Ruth Rae, *Veiled Lines: Threading Australian Nursing into the fabric of the First World War*, (Burwood: The College of Nursing, 2009), 345

⁹⁸ Harris, *More than bombs*, 11

⁹⁹ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 7

CHAPTER 3

The Historical Context of Australian Nursing

The evolution of modern nursing as a respected profession for women started with the work of Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War in 1854. Prior to the commencement of the war, nursing in England was undertaken by people of the 'lower classes' who had little training in nursing the sick¹. As nursing was not considered an employment choice for ladies it was imperative for Nightingale that it be considered a respectable profession². She is "best known for her campaign to improve hospital care and for her crusade to introduce training for nurses...[which is considered] the critical intervention that society needed to bring about improvements in health..."³. Nightingale introduced secular nursing, as she believed that nurses who focused on the care of the body rather than the soul were the most useful⁴. She was strong in her advocacy of the desired qualities in nurses; they had to be gentlewomen who were trustworthy, quiet, punctual, neat and clean⁵.

Prior to her work in the Crimea, Nightingale studied at the Kaiserworth Institute in Germany in 1852, where she attended lectures by visiting physicians and observed surgical procedures⁶. At the Institute she discovered that the "...attitudes...of compassion and caring and sensitivity to the needs of the patients were markedly absent in the so called 'charitable institutions'..."⁷. After returning to England she was appointed to the position of Superintendent of The Institution for the care of sick Gentlewomen in Distressed Circumstances, where she implemented the changes she had observed at the Kaiserworth Institute⁸. An article by Thomas Chenery, published in *The Times* on 12 October 1854, which described the poor

¹ The plight of nursing in England was highlighted in the Charles Dickens novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* with the character Sarah Gamp a deliberate reflection of the work of lower class nursing and the high mortality rate caused by this nursing style. (Ann Marie Rafferty, Jane Robinson and Ruth Elkan, "Nursing Uniforms: Romantic Idea, Functional Attire, or Instrument of Social Change?" *Nursing History Review*, Vol 2, Feb 1994, 179)

² Helen Rappaport, *No Place For Ladies: The Untold Story of Women in the Crimean War*, (London: Aurum Press, 2007), 94

³ Siobhan Nelson and Anne Marie Rafferty, edit. *Notes on Nightingale: The influence and Legacy of a Nursing Icon*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), 2

⁴ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 4 and 8

⁵ Norma Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings: An Australian nursing memoir*, (Sydney: New Holland, 2010), 15

⁶ Elizabeth Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale 1860 - 1990*, (Richmond: Spectrum Publications, 1992), 4

⁷ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 5

⁸ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 6 and 7

conditions for soldiers and the high mortality rate in the Crimean War, changed the direction of Nightingale's career⁹. Sidney Herbert, Secretary of War and Nightingale's close personal friend, invited her to take a group of nurses to Scutari in the Crimea¹⁰. She was appointed as Lady Superintendent of the General Hospital in Turkey, arriving in Scutari with a carefully selected group of nurses on 4 November 1854¹¹. Nightingale set strict rules about the age and experience of the nurses she took to the Crimea. No one "...would be considered without evidence of their experience or fitness to perform the arduous duties they undertake".¹²

To ensure parents permitted women of privilege to become nurses, Nightingale instituted gender specific training. Couples or families had lived on hospital grounds previously and shared the nursing duties. Under Nightingale's system, only female nurses were allowed to live-in together on the hospital grounds, which helped to allay mothers' fears for their daughters' welfare away from home¹³. Nightingale's methodology was to institute a dictatorial control over the nurses; they were obliged to sign contracts agreeing to submit to her authority¹⁴. She knew that her venture into the Crimea would be thwarted if the rules of Victorian propriety were contravened, and so she:

...ferociously insisted on strict obedience to her orders. In the contract she wrote for the nurses she made their three worst failings – neglect of duty, immoral conduct, and drunkenness [which were all considered] cause for dismissal¹⁵.

It was imperative to Nightingale's style of nursing that the women showed sensitivities towards the feelings of their patients and attended to their needs¹⁶. She introduced secular nursing as previously most care of patients had been undertaken by nuns. Nightingale believed that religion complicated the reforms she wanted to implement in the Crimea¹⁷. To ensure respectability

⁹ Rappaport, *No Place For Ladies*, 94

¹⁰ Burchill, *Australian Nurses since Nightingale*, 7

¹¹ Burchill, *Australian Nurses since Nightingale*, 7. see also Helmstadter, "Navigating the political straits in the Crimean War" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 35

¹² Rappaport, *No Place For Ladies*, 101

¹³ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 49

¹⁴ Rappaport, *No Place For Ladies*, 104

¹⁵ Helmstadter, *Notes on Nightingale*, 35.

¹⁶ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 12.

¹⁷ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 8

the nurses' uniforms, which created a corporate identity amongst the women, were designed to deliberately hide the female form¹⁸. It was also to protect the women "...from being mistaken for ladies of lesser virtue who were to be found around the army barracks"¹⁹. The nurses' uniforms became a symbol because they, "... not only became recognisable by their dress, but their uniform clothing came to symbolise caring, professional competence, and above all, unquestionable moral character"²⁰.

Nightingale understood the only way to convince the public back home that females made effective nurses in the war zone was by "...assuming dictatorial control and fighting British military bureaucracy tooth and nail to the bitter end..."²¹. By the conclusion of the Crimean War, the legend of the 'Lady with the lamp' had been created and with it Nightingale had commenced the establishment of an efficient and respectable nursing service²². She had a unique social position for a woman at the time and could garner public respect and authority through her work²³. Nightingale suffered from poor health for the rest of her life and was confined to her room; yet through constant correspondence and the support of influential friends and Government contacts she continued to work on health reform²⁴. Nightingale was able to draw the Government's attention to the disorganisation and incompetence of the British Military and in doing so ensured the reforming of the Army Medical Service²⁵.

During the Crimean War, the public made donations to the Nightingale Fund, and it was from this money, in 1860, that St Thomas' School of Nursing was established in London, becoming the first secular training school for nurses²⁶. The nurse training system developed from St Thomas' formed the basis of modern nursing in Australia, America and the United Kingdom²⁷. Nightingale was steadfast about the reasons women trained at St Thomas'; they had to

¹⁸ Rappaport, *No place for Ladies*, 105. See also Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 13

¹⁹ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 13

²⁰ Poplin, "Nursing Uniforms: Romantic Idea..."

²¹ Rappaport, *No place for Ladies*, 100

²² Helmstadter, "Navigating the political straits in the Crimean War" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 53

²³ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 10

²⁴ Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 58. see also Burchill, *Australian nurses*, 11

²⁵ Nelson "The Nightingale Imperative" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 20, see also Magnello, "The passionate statistician" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 121

²⁶ Nelson and Rafferty, introduction of *Notes on Nightingale*, 4

²⁷ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 11

have a sense of vocation rather than be motivated for their own personal gain²⁸. The teachings were designed so the student could learn through observing and following case histories²⁹. The trainees' lives were closely monitored. Historian Elizabeth Burchill observed that, "No minor failure on the part of the student was overlooked"³⁰. Nursing as a profession moved forward because of the establishment of Nightingale's teachings at St Thomas' Hospital³¹. The pivotal point to Nightingale's nursing style was the implementation of sanitation principles, these included hygiene, good ventilation, a nourishing diet, light-filled rooms and activity for the patients³².

Nightingale wrote, *Notes on Nursing: what is it and what it is not* and in this described the basic principles required for clinical care. According to Ruth Rae, it "...also outlined the hierarchical hospital system which firmly placed the matron at the top. A matron was unquestionably a woman and it gave her a unique power base rarely afforded to any woman at this time"³³. Sarah Wardroper became the first Matron at St Thomas'. She had a military style of discipline, which was designed to exact absolute obedience from the women³⁴. Nurses were taught to stop their patient care and stand to attention when the Matron entered the ward³⁵. Wardroper shared Nightingale's zeal for reform, and as Matron "...was to be supreme in her own department; the nurses were to be solely responsible to her, and should obey all her orders and directions without the interference of men"³⁶. This became an inbuilt leadership chain, which did not exist for most other forms of work for women.

The introduction of anaesthesia to surgical procedures meant nurses were required to treat patients before and after surgery, encouraging the need for highly skilled women³⁷. It also meant that complex surgeries were now

²⁸ Rafferty and Wall, "An icon and iconoclast for today" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 137

²⁹ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 18

³⁰ Burchill, *Australian Nurses since Nightingale*, 173

³¹ Rappaport, *No place for Ladies*, 232

³² Nelson and Rafferty, *Notes on Nightingale*, 3

³³ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 12

³⁴ Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 61

³⁵ Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 67

³⁶ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 14

³⁷ Judith Godden, *Lucy Osburn, a lady displaced: Florence Nightingales envoy to Australia*, (Sydney: Sydney University press, 2006), 39

possible. The nurses' role was to create a suitable surgical environment and look after the patient's pre and post-operative care³⁸.

The doctors at Sydney Infirmary in Australia believed that a group of Nightingale trained nurses would help to develop this surgical practice³⁹. Sir Henry Parkes, the Colonial Secretary, sent a request to Nightingale asking for a team of her nurses to be sent to Australia to help reform nursing⁴⁰. Nightingale was happy to send the group to implement her training style. It fulfilled her own dream of spreading nursing throughout the world and she believed she owed the Australian colonies a debt of gratitude, as they had been generous donors to the Nightingale Fund⁴¹.

Wardroper chose Lucy Osburn for this position, despite her lack of nursing training, because of her status as a Lady. Due to sickness, Osburn had missed much of her year of training at St Thomas⁴². When she signed the contract on 28 November 1867 she became "...directly responsible' to the Board of Directors and had 'sole control and direction' of the 'Nurses and other Female Servants' as well as five Head Nurses going to Sydney with her. Subject to the Board's approval, she could hire and fire her staff"⁴³. Osburn chose to separate herself from her nurses and travelled first class on the voyage to Australia, which created resentment among the women. This set a precedent for decades to come of the relationship between the Head of Nursing and the nurses⁴⁴.

Osburn and the Nightingale nurses arrived in Sydney in 1868. Osburn's task was to reform nursing in Australia, in the short term by improving patient health and in the long term by implementing a training program designed to spread throughout the colonies⁴⁵. To develop this effective nursing system she had to replace the ineffective hygiene practices existing at the Infirmary⁴⁶. Her expectations of the nurses matched Nightingale's, with the five qualities considered most important being "...punctuality... quietness, trustworthiness,

³⁸ Nelson and Rafferty, *Notes on Nightingale*, 61

³⁹ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 40

⁴⁰ Nelson, "The Nightingale Imperative" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 15

⁴¹ Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 63

⁴² Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 50. See also Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 64

⁴³ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 73

⁴⁴ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 15

⁴⁵ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 13

⁴⁶ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 14

personal neatness and cleanliness..."⁴⁷ It was compulsory that the nurses live-in on the grounds of the hospital, and they were protected by extremely strict conventions on and off duty⁴⁸. Marriage was forbidden during training and throughout their nursing career; any woman who married had to leave the nursing profession⁴⁹. They were required to wear an outdoor uniform so they could be distinguished when they were off the grounds of the Infirmary, a means of keeping their behaviour respectable and circumspect⁵⁰. The Australian women who commenced Nightingale nursing training followed these strict protocols⁵¹. They were informed that Nightingale had set a standard of excellence that all trainees should aim to achieve⁵².

Osburn faced a number of difficulties in the implementation of Nightingale nursing. She relocated to Australia on the understanding that she would be in charge of the nurses; however, Alfred Roberts, the doctor in charge and a supporter of Nightingale nursing, expected that he would maintain overall control of the nursing staff. "The addition of a matron was a blow against Roberts' concept of a subordinate nursing force.... Roberts had no problem with a Matron controlling the nurses, so long as he controlled the Matron"⁵³. When Roberts proposed the alternative, a ward sister to be supervised by the hospital surgeon, Nightingale informed him that a Matron supervising the nurses was a pivotal part of Nightingale nursing⁵⁴. Another issue was Osburn's own belief that she was superior to the men in the colony because of her position as a Lady. They in turn believed they maintained the superiority in the new Australian society, which did not necessarily heed social status and based superiority on wealth and gender⁵⁵.

Osburn's relationship with the five Nightingale nurses began to deteriorate, too, as she favoured the Australian trained nurses over the women she had brought from England. Godden wrote that, "Osburn was willing to go on record

⁴⁷ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 54

⁴⁸ Peter Rees, *The Other ANZACS: The Extraordinary Story of our World War I nurses*, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008), xiv

⁴⁹ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 37

⁵⁰ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 28

⁵¹ An incident not long after Osburn's arrival confirmed the value of the Nightingale Nurses to the Sydney establishment; during a tour of Australia Prince Alfred was shot and nursed back to health by this group of nurses. Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 14

⁵² Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 189

⁵³ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 48

⁵⁴ Godden, "The dream of nursing the Empire" in *Notes on Nightingale*, 63

⁵⁵ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 112

destroying any illusion that the nurses trained at St Thomas' Nightingale School of Nursing were in any way superior to colonials, or adequate ward sisters"⁵⁶. Osburn's relationship with Nightingale also soured. The time delay in receiving correspondence caused misunderstandings and Nightingale blamed Osburn for creating the problems that she encountered. Nightingale would not forgive Osburn for her strained relationship with the British nurses as it cast doubt on St Thomas' School nurse training system⁵⁷. Despite losing favour with Nightingale and the difficulties she faced over the 18 years of working at the hospital, Lucy Osburn is honoured as the founder of Nightingale's nursing in Australia⁵⁸. Jennifer Williams has acknowledged that, "The same nurse training system which fostered endurance, persistence and ability, also imbued nurses with the very worthwhile characteristics of loyalty and esteem"⁵⁹.

The Nightingale system was instituted throughout Australia, as trained nurses accepted positions in other hospitals. In 1884 a group of Nightingale nurses went directly to Tasmania from England, led by Miss Isabelle Rathie⁶⁰. She moved to the Melbourne Hospital in 1890 to share her experience of the Nightingale system⁶¹. Miss Hester McLean became the first Nightingale trained nurse to become the Lady Superintendent of Nursing from 1900 to 1903 at the Women's Hospital in Melbourne⁶². In 1890 Martha Farquharson, who was a Nightingale trained nurse, went to the Alfred Hospital from Manchester Hospital in England⁶³. She was to replace Isabella Rathie in 1895 at the Melbourne Hospital and then became the Lady Superintendent of Nurses at the Base Hospital in Bendigo⁶⁴. She was replaced in 1900 by Miss A Burleigh, who had trained at the Nightingale School at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London⁶⁵. Osburn and her nurses became known in Western Australia through

⁵⁶ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 200. The nightingale nurses dismissed by Osburn continued nursing in the colony. Miss Haldane Turiff became Matron of the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne from 1870 – 1880 (*Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 6 – site accessed 27/03/2014). Sister Blundell became Matron of the Benevolent Society. Bessy Chant returned to private nursing before becoming the Matron of Gladesville Asylum and Annie Miller continued private nursing. Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 31

⁵⁷ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 207

⁵⁸ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 313

⁵⁹ Williams, *Victoria's Living Memorial*, xvi

⁶⁰ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 31

⁶¹ <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01071b.htm> - site accessed 30/03/2014

⁶² <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3m25/maclean-hester> – site accessed 04/01/2014

⁶³ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 32

⁶⁴ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 32

⁶⁵ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 34

the telegraph line, which linked the Eastern colonies to Perth in 1877⁶⁶. Nightingale nursing spread to Western Australia during the typhoid epidemic, which lasted from 1895 to 1900, as nurses from Melbourne Hospital went to Western Australia during the crisis⁶⁷.

The respected role of hospitals in society meant the status of the nursing profession continued to improve⁶⁸. The implementation of Nightingale nursing was a success, as:

Between 1870 and 1885 no fewer than 12 of her probationary nurses had overall responsibility for Nursing Services in NSW, TAS and SA... trainees of Sydney Hospital who perpetuated the honour of Miss Osburn wherever they worked, by training the next generation within the local community⁶⁹.

Most of the hospitals followed Nightingale's design of ward layout, sanitation and cleanliness⁷⁰.

Before Federation in 1901, each colony in Australia controlled its own defence force and the nurses in it⁷¹. The first Army Nursing Service in Australia commenced in 1899 in New South Wales. Nurses from this group were sent to the Boer War and incorporated with British Medical Units⁷². The important lesson to come from the Boer War was the realisation that Military Hospitals could not function effectively without female nurses⁷³. After Federation, the need for a regulated nursing service became evident⁷⁴. A reorganisation of the medical services resulted in the beginning of the Australian Army Medical Corps⁷⁵.

1 July 1902 is regarded as the official beginning of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS). Paragraph 9 of the General Order 123 of the Military Forces of the Commonwealth stated that "An Army Nursing Service Reserve will be

⁶⁶ Rae, *Veiled lines*, 38

⁶⁷ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 36

⁶⁸ Harris, *More than bombs*, 17

⁶⁹ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 31

⁷⁰ Harris, *More than bombs*, 27

⁷¹ <http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE0408b.htm> - site accessed 20/01/2015

⁷² Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 171

⁷³ Rupert Goodman, *Our War Nurses: The History of the Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps 1902 – 1988*, (Bowen Hills: Boolarong Publications, 1988), 10

⁷⁴ Harris, *More than bombs*, 17

⁷⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 26

organised from those trained nurses who are qualified and willing to serve as such with stationary Field Hospitals and base Hospitals when required upon a national emergency”⁷⁶. The AANS pledge defines the expectations on the nurses and refers to the “unity and comradeship” between the women (Appendix 1). The roles of nurses as part of the military administration were not clearly defined and the question of nurses being part of the Australian Armed Forces was not addressed for a number of years⁷⁷. The nurses were encouraged to become ‘efficient’, which meant they had to “...qualify in first aid and to attend three out of four lectures annually on the organisation of the military hospitals, hygiene and military surgery”⁷⁸.

Until the beginning of World War I the AANS as a Reserve remained a voluntary auxiliary group⁷⁹. The military training the nurses received was rudimentary⁸⁰. At the outbreak of War in 1914 the Australian Government offered medical services to the British in support of their war effort⁸¹. The civilian nurses were “...well trained for the standards of the day, well-organised in a professional sense, supported by strong professional bodies ready to volunteer their nursing skills in the service of their country”⁸². The nurses who enlisted did so out of duty to their country and out of a sense of adventure. Rees noted that, “As with the men, going to war seemed the chance of a lifetime”⁸³. World War One became the first test of the services of Australia and New Zealand as the AANS⁸⁴. There were, however, no Australian regulations that governed the women and they served under Imperial regulations⁸⁵.

Only trained nurses could enlist in the AANS. They provided references recommending them for military service and had to pass a medical examination. They submitted to the same military regulations as officers although they were not given military rank⁸⁶. All of the Australian Matrons in

⁷⁶ <http://www.centenaryww1orange.com.au/stories/australian-nurses-in-world-war-i/> site accessed 28/2/2015

⁷⁷ Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 3

⁷⁸ Harris, *More than bombs*, 39

⁷⁹ Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 13

⁸⁰ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 27

⁸¹ Harris, *More than bombs*, 2

⁸² Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 18

⁸³ Rees, *The Other ANZACS*, 9. See also Harris, *More than bombs*, 42

⁸⁴ Rees, *The Other ANZACS*, xi

⁸⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 4

⁸⁶ Harris, *More than bombs*, 3. See also Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 38

World War I were trained under the Nightingale system⁸⁷. At the beginning of the war the Australian nurses were sent to the already established British Hospitals until an Australian General Hospital (AGH) could be created⁸⁸. While the nurses did not hold military rank they were forced to adapt to the military requirements:

Given the environment in which they worked, the nurses became militarised whether they expected or desired it. This process was impossible to avoid in a military hospital, an environment in which male staff and patients had to conform to military rules, regulations and protocols⁸⁹.

As antibiotics did not exist, much of the treatment of patients was by bedside nursing. This meant the direct personal care of the patient at their bedside through bathing, toileting and importantly taking vital signs to recognise the progress of the person's condition⁹⁰. Through this nursing practice, "Many lives were saved by the emphasis on discipline when caring for individual patients"⁹¹. The nurses enhanced their skills by nursing a range of battle casualties. They were limited only by the societal convention that women could not nurse men with venereal disease⁹². According to Rees, their service in the war provided a platform not only for the advancement of nursing as a profession, "but of women's place in society"⁹³.

At the conclusion of the war, doctors and nurses brought back to civilian hospitals the skills they developed⁹⁴. After their return:

...slowly the lessons learnt in war seeped into the curricula and training programs of hospitals and into health policy speeches. The interval between World War One and World War Two was a time of progress through attitudinal changes within the fields of medicine, nursing and psychology⁹⁵.

⁸⁷ Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 18

⁸⁸ Burchill, *Australian Nurses since Nightingale*, 185

⁸⁹ Harris, *More than bombs*, 49

⁹⁰ Joan Crouch, *One life is ours: The story of Ada Joyce Bridge*, (Darlinghurst: Nightingale Committee St Luke's Hospital, 1989), 10

⁹¹ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 10

⁹² Harris, *More than bombs*, 5

⁹³ Rees, *The Other ANZACS*, xviii

⁹⁴ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 20

⁹⁵ Rae, *Veiled Lines*, 348

The returned nurses who went on to hold senior positions in hospitals influenced the next generation of nurses⁹⁶. Yet, the questions around the nurses' military rank remained unresolved:

As the years rolled on and the medical staff in general became more appreciative of the skills of the nursing Sisters, so more discussions took place, about their proper role and function, how their service might be more effectively and efficiently used in the army medical service, especially in the CCS's and AGH⁹⁷.

Due to the standardisation of examinations and training, any differences between hospitals began to disappear⁹⁸. At the beginning of World War II in September 1939 the members of the AANS were called to active service⁹⁹. There were only 600 nurses in the Reserve. A number of them were World War I nurses and too old for service so applications were invited from qualified nurses to join the AANS¹⁰⁰.

The strict instruction and adherence to procedures developed by Nightingale and brought to Australia by Osburn meant the total indoctrination and enculturation of all nurses who trained through this program, which was the way women continued to train during the 1930s in Australia. They were obedient, and if they chose not to be obedient, they chose not to be a nurse. There was an expectation of discipline; by taking on the mantle of a nurse and living-in made it a twenty-four-hour a day transformation into a nurse. They knew how to behave because of this rigorous training and were ideal candidates for a military situation as they had already learned to conform, obey and follow orders. Within this regime, camaraderie was built. The Nightingale system had created for the nurses "...a haven as well as a home and workplace. The comradeship of the Nurses' Home was a legacy of the Nightingale system which sustained nurses for a century"¹⁰¹. This nursing tradition and its inherent qualities formed the occupational ethos of Australia's World War II nurses.

⁹⁶ Bassett, *Gun and Brooches*, 107

⁹⁷ Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 98

⁹⁸ Harris, *More than bombs*, 21

⁹⁹ Burchill, *Australian nurses since Nightingale*, 188

¹⁰⁰ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 113

¹⁰¹ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 116

CHAPTER 4

The Nurses at War – World War Two

A great many Australian women heeded the call for trained nurses at the beginning of World War II with almost a third of the 4000 working nurses volunteering to serve overseas¹. There were specific age requirements for the women eligible to join; nursing staff had to be between the ages of 25 and 35 and Matrons, under 40. This age range was later extended to allow women from the ages of 21 to 40, and even up to 45 in special circumstances, to enlist as part of the AANS². Each applicant had to be a fully qualified nurse with no less than three years training in medical and surgical nursing in a hospital. She had to be a British subject domiciled in Australia, single (unmarried, widowed, or divorced) without dependents³. Their motivations for enlistment were similar to those of the nurses of World War I; they wanted to travel and to serve King and Country, or they enlisted out of a sense of adventure⁴. Jan Bassett credits family tradition as a motivation for enlisting; if siblings, parents or aunts and uncles were enlisting or had served in the World War One the nurses wanted to follow in their footsteps⁵. Civilian hospitals were reluctant to let their nurses enlist, as they were considered necessary to the war effort in Australia. Jessie Blanch, one of those who joined the AANS, informed the hospital authorities that she would resign if they refused to let her go (Appendix 2, figure 14)⁶. This exemplifies the enthusiasm of the women who put their jobs on the line to join the war effort.

The group of nurses who would become known as the ‘*Vyner Brooke* nurses’ were part of the 8th Division AIF (Australian Imperial Force), which included the 2/4th CCS (Casualty Clearing Station), the 2/10th AGH and the 2/13th AGH⁷. The 2/10th AGH was hastily formed and temporarily established at Sydney Show ground before it embarked on the ship the *Queen Mary* under the direction of

¹ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 112

² Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 113

³ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 113

⁴ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 2

⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 114

⁶ Jessie Blanch interview transcript with Barb Angell 6th May 1998, page 1

⁷ Catherine McCullagh, edit. *Willingly into the Fray: One Hundred Years of Australian Army Nursing*, (Newport: Big Sky Publishing, 2010), 120

Matron Olive Paschke and arrived in Singapore on 28 January 1941 (Appendix 2, figure 3 and figure 5)⁸. The AGH established itself in Malacca, dealing chiefly with "...skin complaints, malaria, common colds, accidents and anxiety neuroses, but the number of sick was not excessive"⁹. The 2/4th CCS arrived in Malaya during February 1941 under the supervision of Matron Irene Drummond and was located at Kajang near Kuala Lumpur¹⁰ (Appendix 2, figure 1 and figure 4).

Britain, with Winston Churchill as its Prime Minister, had been fighting the war against Nazi Germany and could not afford to divide its naval forces to send ships in defence of Singapore¹¹. Churchill did not see the potential danger to Singapore when he stated that:

There is no objection in principle to preparing the necessary plans...but we must not tie up a lot of troops in these regions which we can so readily and rapidly reinforce from India...I view with great reluctance the continued diversion of troops, aircraft and supplies to a theatre which it is improbable will be lighted up unless we are heavily beaten elsewhere¹².

This was despite the fact that as General Gordon Bennett, the Officer in Command of the 8th Division, wrote:

Malaya was important to Japan because it produced rubber and tin in large quantities... Singapore was important because it was the gateway on the shortest route between Europe and East Asia and because Great Britain had constructed a costly and useful naval base there¹³.

Without strong support from Churchill, the Australian government decided to increase the 8th Division forces in Malaya, and this necessitated another General Hospital¹⁴. The 2/13th AGH was created on 11 August 1941 in Melbourne following requests by A. P Derham A.D.M.S (Assistant Director

⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 3.

⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 4

¹⁰ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 95. See also Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 133.

¹¹ Ewer, *The long road to Changi*, 32

¹² Ong Chit Chung, *Operation Matador: Britain's War Plans against the Japanese 1918 – 1941*, (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), 143 -5

¹³ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, 42

¹⁴ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 13

Medical Services) 8th Division for additional medical personnel¹⁵. The *Wangarella*, carrying the 2/13th AGH, arrived in Singapore on 15 September 1941 and established itself at St Patrick's School (Appendix 2, figure 2)¹⁶. Matron Irene Drummond was taken from the already established 2/4th CCS to run the 2/13th AGH and was replaced by temporary Matron Kathleen (Kit) Kinsella (Appendix 2, figure 6)¹⁷. Staff Nurses were detached from this group for duty with the 10th AGH in Malacca¹⁸. On the journey from Australia many of the nurses were disappointed to find they were headed for Singapore or Malacca rather than to the Middle East where the war was being actively fought and where there was dire need for medical assistance¹⁹. Singapore, alternatively, was considered an impregnable fortress²⁰. In reality, "Singapore itself was not a fortress. It was an island, containing a naval base, with the naval base being defended by a fortress system"²¹. Wilma Oram who travelled with the 2/13th AGH considered the strength of the allied forces in Singapore meant it would not be a dangerous location to nurse at, nor one that would host the injured from the war effort (Appendix 2, figure 7)²².

During 1941 the nurses of the 2/4th CCS, 2/10th AGH and 2/13th AGH spent their time establishing hospitals. Outside their work hours they were given time to explore Singapore and its surroundings. A popular venue was the Singapore Club, "where expats opened up their prestigious homes to the girls to enjoy a little bit of good old family life again"²³. The scarcity of single European women in Singapore meant that the nurses were an instant success and a welcome addition to the social life of the colony²⁴. Until the end of 1941, "the war was more of an occasional inconvenience than the life and death struggle it was for others"²⁵.

¹⁵ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 3

¹⁶ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 1

¹⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 11

¹⁸ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 9

¹⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 12

²⁰ Ewer, *The long road to Changi*, 1. See also Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to fall?*

https://britishhiroshima.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/did-singapore-have-to-fall_churchill-the-impregnable-fortress.pdf, 87 site accessed 06/06/2015

²¹ Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to fall?* https://britishhiroshima.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/did-singapore-have-to-fall_churchill-the-impregnable-fortress.pdf, 31 site accessed 06/06/2015

²² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 37

²³ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 21. See also Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 95

²⁴ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 95

²⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 77

While the Australian soldiers and nurses were in Singapore the Japanese High Command was preparing to implement its war strategy. To advance their ambitions, the Japanese had previously signed the Axis Pact on 27 September 1940 with Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini²⁶. Then, on 5 November Hirohito, the Japanese Emperor, signed off on the war plan of his military leaders²⁷. They entered the war on 8 December 1941 and their well-organised and trained army won a series of victories, occupying most of South-East Asia and large areas of the Pacific²⁸. John Curtin, the Prime Minister of Australia, attempted to secure the country's defence by recalling the Australian Divisions fighting in North Africa to reinforce Singapore. Curtin feared that if Singapore fell, the Japanese would attack Australia. According to Kenny, "Australian interest in the defence against Japan largely revolved around the protection of Singapore, viewed as the last bastion of British power in the Far East and Australia's first line of defence"²⁹. The British Government had grossly underestimated the might of the oncoming Japanese Army³⁰. On 16 December 1941 General Gordon Bennett asked for at least one Australian Division from the Middle East to be sent to Singapore. On 25 December the Australian Government sent strong requests to both Roosevelt and Churchill to reinforce Singapore³¹.

The hospitals' preparations against a Japanese invasion were inadequate as medical staff were incorrectly informed of their capabilities³². A common myth circulated amongst the Australian nurses was that "Singapore was safe because the Japanese were too short sighted to shoot straight"³³. They were under the false impression that if the Japanese entered the conflict they would be easily defeated³⁴. The nurses had no way of knowing how grave their situation was actually becoming³⁵. Jessie Blanch reflected that:

We were told by our spies that the Japanese wore glasses and couldn't see at night. They weren't supposed to be able to do anything. Then

²⁶ Ewer, *The long road*, 37

²⁷ Ewer, *The long road*, 63

²⁸ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, 59. See also McCullagh, *Willingly into the fray*, 51

²⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 6

³⁰ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 41

³¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 43

³² Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 2

³³ Susanna De Vries, *The complete book of Heroic Australian Women: Twenty-One extraordinary women whose stories changed history*, (Pymble: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 525

³⁴ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 47

³⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 48

...the Japanese bombed Singapore. As soon as they began to fight we found they were better equipped. Everything we expected them to do they did in reverse...From the beginning we knew defeat was unavoidable. Thousands suffered from the mistakes of underestimating the enemy³⁶.

As December 1941 continued the situation became perilous for the nurses working in Singapore as the hospitals were forced to act as a CCS treating wounded patients directly from the battle zones³⁷. The hospitals had to expand as the number of battle casualties increased. All leave was cancelled and the nurses worked long hours to cope with the influx of patients, yet despite the extra work "morale was high"³⁸. They received reports, which detailed the brutality of the Japanese armed forces as they invaded Hong Kong, with stories of nurses being raped and killed as they surrendered the hospital³⁹. As the Japanese forces advanced from the north "...much of Singapore's military, and those civilians who had fooled themselves into thinking this would never happen were left vulnerable".⁴⁰

The evacuation of the nurses from Singapore to Australia depicted the confused decision making by the Australian Army⁴¹. During January 1942 Colonel Derham requested that General Bennett urgently evacuate the nurses. This request was continually denied. Bennett worried that if the treatment of the wounded suffered so would morale and Singapore would be surrendered earlier⁴². On 8 February 1942 Derham pleaded for the nurses to be evacuated while there was still time⁴³. The call was finally given on 9 February 1942⁴⁴. The nurses understood their situation was becoming increasingly hopeless as the emblem they wore on their uniforms signifying the Red Cross would not

³⁶ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 111

³⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 85

³⁸ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 525

³⁹ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 98. See also Crouch, *One life*, 21. In Catherine Kenny's account of the attack on St Stephens she described that "On Christmas morning just after the surrender...the Japanese bayoneted the two senior doctors and some of the patients, and repeatedly raped the nurses over a period of twenty-four hours. Three of these nurses were later killed" *Captives*, 21

⁴⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 49

⁴¹ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 137

⁴² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 103. Bennett also worried that civilian morale would suffer with the evacuation of the nurses (Angell, *A Woman's Wars*, 50). See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 42

⁴³ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 42

⁴⁴ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 98

guarantee their safety if there was a Japanese victory⁴⁵. Derham's plan was to send the nurses with casualties. So on 10 February 1942 the river boat *Wah Sui* left Singapore with six nurses aboard⁴⁶. Matrons Olive Paschke and Irene Drummond called the remaining nurses together to ask for volunteers to evacuate. All of the nurses refused to go⁴⁷. Ian Shaw wrote that because, "they had taken an oath of service as nurses, as army officers and as Australians and they were prepared to honour everything that those qualifications implied"⁴⁸. They wanted to stay with their patients and the Matrons agreed with their decision⁴⁹. Florence Trotter recalled that, "...Matron Paschke was informed that the Japanese had surrounded the hospital and we might be taken prisoners of war. Even with this threat there was no sign of panic. The nurses simply carried on the work they had to do"⁵⁰. Despite the confusion about their rank in the armed forces they were told they would be court martialled if they refused to go and were given no other choice than to evacuate⁵¹.

The Matrons split the nurses into two groups, one group of 53 embarked on the *Empire Star* on 11 February 1942⁵². It escaped serious damage after being bombed as it left Singapore Harbour and reached Batavia (now Jakarta) relatively unscathed⁵³. The nurses arrived in Fremantle on 23 February 1942⁵⁴. This boat was one of only two to make it back to Australia safely after surviving an attack from the Japanese⁵⁵. After the departure of the *Empire Star* the remaining 65 nurses were also ordered to evacuate. Despite their desperate pleas to remain with their patients they boarded the *Vyner Brooke* on 12 February 1942. They were fleeing with civilian men, women and children; most of the adults were British citizens who had worked in Singapore before the

⁴⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 105

⁴⁶ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 46

⁴⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 107

⁴⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 106

⁴⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 106

⁵⁰ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 1

⁵¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 107

⁵² Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 10. Two nurses from this group, Margaret Edmondson and Veronica Torney were awarded an MBE and George Medal (Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 113). They threw their bodies onto the patients they were tending on deck as they were peppered by bullets from Japanese planes (Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 139). The nurses, although threatened with court martialling as part of the armed service, were able to receive the George Medal, which is a civilian medal, further exemplifying the confusion of the status of nurses in the AIF.

⁵³ Kenny, *Captives*, 24

⁵⁴ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 51

⁵⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 52

war. The passengers erroneously believed they were aboard an official ship and stood a better chance of surviving when they saw the nurses in their uniform⁵⁶. The *Vyner Brooke* had been owned by the Sarawak Steamship Company and travelled between Sarawak, Singapore and Sumatra (Appendix 4, figure 16). It was designed to carry 12 passengers, when it left the harbour it had 300 passengers on board⁵⁷.

The ship's captain Major Tibbett handed responsibility of the passengers to the nurses who were formed into working teams to hand out rations and tend to the sick⁵⁸. The nurses were given an evacuation plan and, if they were attacked by the Japanese, they had to ensure passengers were safely off the ship before they jumped overboard. Tibbett planned to flee through the Bangka Strait waiting until the cover of night in an attempt to remain undetected by Japanese bombers⁵⁹. The ship was attacked and sunk on 14 February 1942 in the waters off Bangka Island⁶⁰. Jessie Blanch recalled:

The Captain was very good. He zigzagged. They came over and bombed us, and missed us. It was a very small ship. They came back and it is said they dropped 27 bombs. And eventually one hit us. Right down the funnel. The boys down in the engine room were very badly burned. And then we were given orders to abandon ship⁶¹.

Twelve nurses perished from injuries sustained by the bombing or were drowned⁶². The currents off Bangka Island were so strong that the passengers were quickly separated in the water; some took hours to reach shore⁶³. Those who arrived first lit a bonfire as a guide to the others still in the water⁶⁴. Veronica Clancy and Sylvia Muir reached the shore using their uniforms as a sail – as they explained, there was no time for 'false modesty'⁶⁵. Clancy arrived on shore wearing nothing but a corset and man's overcoat, she commented that, "We were practically naked, our uniforms had been taken for sails, our

⁵⁶ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 139

⁵⁷ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 22. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 11

⁵⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 122. See also Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 3

⁵⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 11.

⁶⁰ National Archives transcript, PBX518

⁶¹ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 1

⁶² Simons, *While history passed*, xvii

⁶³ Ralph E.H. Armstrong, *Short cruise on the Vyner Brooke*, (Maidstone: George Mann Books, 2003), 61

⁶⁴ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 25. See also Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 198

⁶⁵ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, page 530

brassieres and singlet straps broken down around our hips somewhere from swimming for so many hours”⁶⁶. Ellen Hannah, Nesta James and Cecelia Delforce were separated in the water. Hannah was eventually rescued by a Malay fisherman who took her to a village, tended to her wounds and fed her, but asked if she could give herself up to the Japanese⁶⁷. After 13 hours in the water James met up with a civilian woman and together they struggled to the beach; Delforce eventually made her own way to shore⁶⁸. The group Florence Trotter was with spent 18 hours in the water before reaching the shore:

We tried all night to get into the beach where two lifeboats had landed. The girls had built a fire but we had to go where the currents took us. After 18 hours in the water, we were swept around the lighthouse into a sandy cove. It was wonderful to feel sand under our feet⁶⁹.

Betty Jeffrey and Iole Harper spent nearly 57 hours in the water and wading through swamps before finally reaching land. They were together in the water for over a day before introducing themselves. Jeffrey wrote that:

...Iole was about fifteen yards ahead of me when suddenly she turned round and called out, “Oh, by the way, what’s your name?” We had been swimming together for twenty-eight hours! So we paused, while we formally introduced ourselves, looked each other over, and exchanged names and addresses. As we belonged to different units; we had never met before⁷⁰.

They had been near the life raft that Matron Paschke and Kathleen Kinsella were on, but were soon separated by the currents. Paschke and Kinsella’s raft did not make it to shore and the women were never seen again. Those who arrived on Bangka Island surrendered to the Japanese. Wilma Oram explained to the Japanese soldiers they were victims of shipwreck and the soldiers found this fact “hilariously funny”⁷¹. Jean Ashton described in her diary the condition the women were in when they reached land: “Many of the girls hands [were] all skinned - sliding down rope to leave the sinking ‘Vyner Brook’. Our chins were skinned too from [the] rubbing [of the] ... life belts. We looked [like]

⁶⁶ Veronica Clancy nursed with the 13th AGH. Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, page 140

⁶⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 15

⁶⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 23

⁶⁹ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 2

⁷⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 13

⁷¹ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 7

wags”⁷². The 29 surviving sisters were housed at the cinema in Muntok with civilian shipwreck survivors⁷³. They were suffering from exhaustion, lacerations from falling debris and exposure⁷⁴.

At the bonfire on Radji Beach a group of civilians decided to surrender to the Japanese. The nurses were invited to join but chose to stay with the wounded⁷⁵. The remaining group was approached by Japanese soldiers who separated the men and women. The men were taken over a hill and bludgeoned to death. They returned for the women who were told to walk into the ocean where they were shot from behind. Vivian Bullwinkel, standing at the end of the line and one of the taller women, was shot through the hip. Feigning death she fell amongst the bodies of her colleagues and waited there until the Japanese left⁷⁶. She retreated into the jungle where she met Private Pat Kingsley who had survived the bayonetting but had life threatening injuries⁷⁷. They made a pact to die rather than surrender believing the Japanese would not take prisoners, but as food supplies were limited and Kingsley required medical attention their situation became precarious. Bullwinkel was told by a local woman she had seen others like her in Muntok, European women who were wearing uniforms with Red Cross armbands⁷⁸. This gave Bullwinkel hope that other nurses had survived the shipwreck.

After 14 days Kingsley and Bullwinkel surrendered to the Japanese. They were taken to Muntok jail where the remaining nurses were being held⁷⁹. Bullwinkel’s arrival inspired hope that other nurses might also return. She waited until all of the Australian nurses were present and told them the story of the massacre⁸⁰. They were all shocked and devastated at what had happened to their colleagues⁸¹. Nesta James wrote a letter detailing the events, which she gave to Air Vice Commodore Modin who was also a prisoner.

⁷² Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 6

⁷³ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 26

⁷⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 38

⁷⁵ National Archive transcript, PBX517

⁷⁶ National Archives transcript, PBX517

⁷⁷ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 538

⁷⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 227

⁷⁹ Pat Kingsley died a few days after, asking for Vivian to see him before he passed.

⁸⁰ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 233

⁸¹ National archives transcript, XPBX27

She asked him to give it to Colonel White, Commander of the 10th AGH, to guarantee the story would not be lost if they did not survive internment⁸².

Modin had requested that the Japanese treat the Australian nurses as military personnel with the status of prisoner rather than internees. He explained they should be awarded the same prisoner of war status as combatants⁸³. The Japanese refused to agree to this request⁸⁴. In her memoirs Jessie Simons recounted her own attempt to explain that the nurses were non-combatants and therefore could not be imprisoned:

...I...rather truculently looked for someone in authority to whom I could expound this doctrine...He asked me, 'will you nurse in a hospital?' 'Oh yes' I replied...'until you can arrange my transport back to Australia. Non-combatants cannot be imprisoned you know'. He said nothing, which we later came to expect as the usual reply⁸⁵.

By treating the Australian nurses as civilian internees and not military personnel, the Japanese were not following the Geneva Convention they had signed on 27 July 1929, and which Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo agreed to observe on 29 January 1942⁸⁶. The "Amelioration of the Condition of wounded and sick of Armies in the field" states that:

The personnel charged exclusively with the removal, transportation, and treatment of the sick and wounded, as well as with the administration of sanitary formations and establishments, and the chaplains attached to

⁸² Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 31

⁸³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 28

⁸⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 240

⁸⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 25. Pat Gunther stated that "...we had explained nicely as we could, that as non-combatants, we couldn't be taken prisoner, and asked the Japanese to get in touch with the Victoria Barracks in Sydney or Melbourne. They said they had already taken both cities" (Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 25)

⁸⁶ The Geneva Convention was created by Henri Dunant who, in 1859, was so horrified by the destruction and suffering of war that he called for an international agreement on how war was to be waged. His actions led to the establishment of the first Geneva Convention of 1864. Following this, Conventions or laws were created to guide international practices in Wartime:

- 1) For the Amelioration of the Wounded and Sick in the Armed Forces and Field
- 2) For the Amelioration of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces and Field
- 3) Relative to the Treatment of prisoners of war
- 4) Relatives to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War

To disregard these conventions can render a National guilty of war crimes against humanity

http://www.ppu.org.uk/learn/texts/doc_geneva_con.html - site accessed 01/02/2015

armies, shall be respected and protected under all circumstances. If they fall into the hands of the enemy they shall not be considered as prisoners of war⁸⁷.

While the Japanese had signed the Convention of the Treatment of the Prisoner of War, they failed to ratify it and so the Allied forces had no way to compel the Japanese to commit to these points. Their only option was to make continued requests of co-operation through direct representations or liaise through the International Red Cross Committee (IRCC)⁸⁸. The unwillingness of the Japanese government to honour the international protocols meant that information was scarce during the war about prisoners in enemy-occupied territory⁸⁹.

As the nurses were not considered part of the Armed forces they could not be protected under these conventions or receive financial support⁹⁰. The Japanese, alternatively, lived by the Bushido Code, which dictated that surrendering was a form of defeat. They were taught to despise anyone who did not fight to the death. An individual could only regain honour by taking one's own life⁹¹. As the nurses were women and did not commit suicide upon surrender, as was expected under the Bushido Code, they had no honour and were to be treated as cowards⁹². They were also young and lacked authority in the eyes of the enemy on the grounds of both gender and youth⁹³. Sylvia Muir, one of the interned nurses, stated that:

They treated us with disdain or indifference: many of them blamed us for the fact they had to guard us. They hoped we would die as soon as possible so they could go home to their families in Japan...They practised refined tortures, hoping that they would break our spirit...This was why they withheld the medicines that could have saved so many lives...⁹⁴.

The internees were moved from Bangka Island on 2 March 1942 and transferred to Bukit Besar, near Palembang on the island of Sumatra (Appendix

⁸⁷ https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule25 – site accessed 01/02/2015

⁸⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 134

⁸⁹ Twomey, *Australia's forgotten prisoners*, 33

⁹⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, 37

⁹¹ <http://www.britannica.com/topic/Bushido> - site accessed 06/06/2014. See also De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 518

⁹² De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 519

⁹³ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 554

⁹⁴ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 543

5, figure 20 and 23)⁹⁵. They were accommodated in abandoned Dutch houses before being moved on the 1 April 1942 to an internment camp in Irenelaan on the other side of Palembang where the men and women were separated⁹⁶. The women's camp had 300 women and children who were Australian, Dutch, British and 'Eurasian'⁹⁷. Hospital facilities were established at each campsite, though they offered little more than a rest from camp life. After discovering the fate of the Australian nurses, during July 1942, Colonel Derham "made several appeals to the Japanese through HQ Malaya Command to have the nurses who were imprisoned in Sumatra repatriated, or failing that, transferred to the care of the A.I.F in Singapore. These appeals were unheeded"⁹⁸. In late 1942 Captain Seiki became the camp Commandant. At the conclusion of the war, the War Crimes Tribunal sentenced Seiki to 15 years imprisonment for his harsh treatment of the prisoners⁹⁹. The Japanese captors ensured the prisoners lived in an information vacuum and at the beginning of internment their families were not told of their whereabouts. It was not until March 1943 that the nurses were allowed to write very short letters home and this communication was all their families received during internment¹⁰⁰. In the same month the names of 17 nurses were broadcast on Japanese radio and they were finally confirmed as prisoners of war during October and November 1943¹⁰¹.

In September 1943 the men were moved from their camp at Palembang and the women transferred to it¹⁰². The men erroneously believed the Japanese were moving into the camp and vandalised it, so the women then had to repair

⁹⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 142.

⁹⁶ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 14. See also Angell, *A Woman's War*, 93. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4.

⁹⁷ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 143

⁹⁸ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 143. Derham commented that: "The work and conduct of the members of the Australian Army Nursing Service in Malaya were so magnificent at all times that I can hardly trust myself to speak of them. Their supreme courage and devotion were never more inspiring than when our hospitals came under heavy fire. It was then they set an example of calmness and courage to many a shaken soldier which brought tears of pride and admiration to the eyes of their male colleagues including myself. The fate of some of them, who were evacuated too late, is the blackest page in the black tragedy of Malaya" (Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 140)

⁹⁹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 42. Captain Seiki is also referred to as "Siki" in the literature.

¹⁰⁰ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 145. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 5. During the same month they were promoted to Officer of the permanent Military Forces of the Commonwealth on 23/03/1943 (Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 151). The AANS members were granted military rank, a fact they would not learn until the conclusion of the war and their release (Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 151)

¹⁰¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 63

¹⁰² Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 145

it upon relocation¹⁰³. The move to the men's camp also signified "...the end of a period of comparative health and well-being"¹⁰⁴. Many of the internees became ill as a result of the inadequate diet and the work load required to run the camp¹⁰⁵. Up to 30 people lived in small houses with no furniture or other necessities. Food rations and medicines were minimal; the declining health of the internees and lack of protein and vitamins gave rise to deficiency diseases¹⁰⁶. The internees were daily called to *tenko*, a roll call to count the prisoners, where they were forced to bow before their captors¹⁰⁷. The number of sick increased and the limited medical supplies meant that "...the patients were overcrowded into confined spaces, and dysentery and incontinence were prevalent"¹⁰⁸.

In late 1943 the military administration, with Seiki as its leader, was replaced by a civil administration so the Japanese soldiers could serve at the front¹⁰⁹. In the few months between late 1943 and April 1944 when the camp was under civilian administration the deterioration of health continued, but life was easier for the internees. On 1 April 1944, the military administration was reinstated with Captain Seiki regaining control over the camp. Nesta James wrote that he informed the internees "...that we would be very strictly dealt with for any breach of discipline whatsoever and that he had power, without going any higher, to condemn us to death if he so desired for breach of discipline"¹¹⁰. After years of working for no money the nurses were suddenly paid wages in May 1944, which started the theory they were being prepared for repatriation or the conclusion of the war was close, even though life in the camp continued to decline under the Seiki led administration¹¹¹. Three months later on the 11 August 1944, however, the oil fields at Pladjou, near the internment camp, were bombed by Allied aircraft, which indicated to them that the War continued¹¹². Despite the confirmation, the Australian nurses

¹⁰³ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 127

¹⁰⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 69

¹⁰⁵ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 138

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 271

¹⁰⁷ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 5

¹⁰⁸ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 148

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 253

¹¹⁰ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 145

¹¹¹ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6. See also Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 146

¹¹² Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 146. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 78

were jubilant at seeing an allied war plane¹¹³. During this same month and after years of no communication with their loved ones the nurses suddenly received their first mail in August 1944. It comprised letters, which were dated from 1942 and 1943¹¹⁴. And two months later in October 1944 they received one American Red Cross parcel, their first delivery of this kind during their years of internment¹¹⁵.

The Japanese continued to move their prisoners to new campsites, even though many of the women were seriously ill, and on 16 October 1944 they were relocated back to Muntok¹¹⁶. The health of all of the women deteriorated further at this new campsite¹¹⁷. On 8 April 1945 the internees were then moved back to Palembang for a few days before being taken by train to a rubber plantation in Southern Sumatra, called Belalau, where they arrived on 12 April 1945¹¹⁸. This was to be their final camp. The nurses always travelled in their AANS uniforms in case they were noticed by people who could report their whereabouts¹¹⁹. Unknown to them they had been sighted in their uniforms in 1943; however, this did not help to repatriate them to Australia¹²⁰.

Having survived imprisonment for three years the nurses started to die from malnutrition and disease in the last months of the war¹²¹. On 8 February 1945 the AANS lost their first colleague Wilhelmina Raymont, thereafter quickly losing Rene Singleton, Blanche Hempstead, Shirley Gardam, Gladys Hughes, Winnie May Davis, Dorothy Freeman and Pearl Mittelheuser before they were released¹²². The nurses wore their uniforms and attempted to hold military funerals for those who died¹²³.

The Allied victory over Germany occurred on 7 May 1945¹²⁴. The first atomic bomb fell in Japan on 6 August 1945 and the second on 9 August 1945. The

¹¹³ Seiki had warned the nurses they might be bombed and according to Simons this installed a sense of hope as they argued the Japanese "...supremacy could not be so complete nor their victories so continuous as they maintained..." Simons, *While history passed*, 72. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 154

¹¹⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 83

¹¹⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 84

¹¹⁶ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 49

¹¹⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 58

¹¹⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 168

¹¹⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 90

¹²⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, 141

¹²¹ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 107

¹²² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 266

¹²³ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 148

¹²⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 1970), 868

nurses did not know of Germany's surrender, of the atomic bombs or the conclusion of the war, for "nothing was said by the Japanese about the end of the war. The prisoners were kept in ignorance"¹²⁵. Official peace with Japan was declared on 15 August 1945¹²⁶. It was not until 24 August 1945 that Seiki informed all internees that, "The war is over, we can be friends now"¹²⁷. The nurses met the announcement of the conclusion of the war with mixed emotions.

The internees were free, but too stunned to appreciate the import of the word – [all] Oram, Woodbridge, Tweddell, Muir and Ashton felt was relief. Simons sat under a rubber tree and cried for half an hour. Blanch did not believe it until there was plenty of food and clothing. Ashton pitied the parents of the nurses who had died, Hannah felt 'very flat' and James elated¹²⁸.

The prisoners' health improved with a better diet and lighter duties as the men were allowed to visit the women's camp and help with the chores. The Japanese were not eager to identify the location of the internees at Belalau. Pat Gunther, one of the surviving sisters, stated that, "It was only later we were told that our charming hosts of the last few years stubbornly refused to admit they had the Australian Army nurses as prisoners"¹²⁹.

Hayden Lennard, who was a war correspondent, Squadron leader Fred Madsen and Pilot Ken Brown spent three weeks searching Sumatra for the interned AANS members¹³⁰. Lennard, Brown and Madsen flew into Palembang only to find the women had been moved to Loebok Linggau¹³¹. After discovering this information Royal Marine Gideon Jacobs was parachuted into the jungle north of Sumatra with two Australian Sergeants Gillam and Bates¹³². He was able to confirm the whereabouts of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses and by the second week of September they had identified the location of the Australian women and plans for their rescue and repatriation were drawn up¹³³. Jacobs confirmed

¹²⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 179

¹²⁶ Roland Perry, *Pacific 360: Australia's battle for survival in World War II*, 451

¹²⁷ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 555. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 111

¹²⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 97

¹²⁹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 92. See also, Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 194. See also Simons, *While history*, 117.

¹³⁰ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 149

¹³¹ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 9

¹³² Armstrong, *Short cruise on the Vyner Brooke*, 120

¹³³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 283

that the conditions of the camp were some of the worst he had ever seen, stating that he “...was appalled by the state of the prisoners”¹³⁴. When Brown arrived at the camp he, too, was shocked by the conditions, “The smell was unbelievable.... And it was two weeks since the end of the war so they’d received a bit of nourishment. They were in a terrible condition”¹³⁵. For the rest of her life, when Betty Jeffrey wrote to Brown she signed her name ‘stinky’¹³⁶.

The nurses were taken from the internment camp to a train 12 miles away. Here they questioned Lennard about news and current affairs they had missed during their internment. Simons wrote that, “For once his role was reversed and he was on the talking end of a press conference”¹³⁷. In a wireless message back to Australia Haydon Lennard reported that, “...even the stretcher cases [were] so overjoyed [by] their liberation... [I am sure] they’d... [have got up and] walked twelve miles... had no transport been available”¹³⁸. The nurses were met by Colonel Annie Sage, who organised the AANS for duty in the South-West Pacific Area¹³⁹. She explained that her greatest wish had been to find them¹⁴⁰. The nurses were then flown to Singapore Hospital for rehabilitation. Specialists considered that at least five of the nurses would not have survived another week in internment; Joyce Tweddell was hours away from dying¹⁴¹. The women were received at the hospital and were reunited with former colleagues they had worked with in Singapore before evacuation and with a number of the men they had been forced to leave. These sisters barely recognised their former colleagues, “...tired, skinny, sick and emotionally drained nurses...”¹⁴² Lennard described the emotion of the experience,

When the nurses arrived [in] Singapore...[they were reunited with] AIF men who had been [in the] prison camps...there [were] heartrending scene[s]...as [the] nurses, some human skeletons, others like old women barely able to walk, shuffled up stairs there [were] cries...[from the]

¹³⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 99. See also, Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 190. See also Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 185

¹³⁵ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 188

¹³⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 188

¹³⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 117

¹³⁸ National Archives transcript, PBX587

¹³⁹ Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 16 2002 – site accessed 27/03/2014

¹⁴⁰ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 93. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 119

¹⁴¹ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 123

¹⁴² Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 110

men...give us guns ...[S]ome AIF hospital patients obviously becoming hysterical had to be controlled¹⁴³.

The original plan was to fly the nurses home, but the decision was made that a slow boat ride would be better for their continued health¹⁴⁴. They would be allowed to return to Australia when their shrunken stomachs could accept a normal diet¹⁴⁵. The doctors at Singapore Hospital also considered that it would be "...preferable to keep the nurses where they were until they were fitter, healthier and photogenic enough to be presented to the Australian people"¹⁴⁶. The nurses were fit to travel within a month and boarded the ship *Manunda* (Appendix 7, figure 30)¹⁴⁷. It was somewhat fitting that the *Manunda* should be the ship to transport the Australians home as it had been bombed in February 1942 while anchored in Darwin and it was repaired in time to bring the *Vyner Brooke* nurses home¹⁴⁸. On 18 October 1945 the *Manunda* arrived in Fremantle and the nurses from Perth were reunited with their families and other well-wishers. On 24 October 1945 the ship arrived in Melbourne, disembarking the Victorian, South Australian and Tasmanian nurses, before continuing on to Sydney on 26 October to discharge the NSW and Queensland nurses¹⁴⁹.

The nurses faced a number of difficulties when they returned to Australia. Many of their families had been told by psychologists that the best way for their daughters to improve and settle back into life was to not to ask about their internment¹⁵⁰. This caused feelings of alienation from their own families. Wilma Oram reflected that:

To come home and find everyone apparently indifferent was hard...They could straightaway tell you what a dreadful war they'd had back here, how they couldn't get cigarettes, tea, this and that. We suddenly realised that our experience wasn't nearly as important as we'd thought¹⁵¹.

¹⁴³ National Archives transcript, XPBS90

¹⁴⁴ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 558

¹⁴⁵ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 558

¹⁴⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 291

¹⁴⁷ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 16.

¹⁴⁸ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 154.

¹⁴⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 297

¹⁵⁰ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 33

¹⁵¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 198

After spending so many years together, the former Prisoners of War struggled with the distance between themselves and their colleagues who were now dispersed around Australia. The nurses who lived in the same city would spend time together. They used their collective experience as a form of counselling for each other. There were also long term physical problems from the inadequate diet and lack of vitamins¹⁵². Their continued friendship after the war continued to emphasise the allegiance the women felt towards each other. The following chapters will consider the qualities that helped the women survive internment which was instituted by their living-in-training and ethos.

¹⁵² De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 565

CHAPTER 5

Ethos

As discussed earlier, the Florence Nightingale nursing system instituted by Lucy Osburn in Australia encouraged women to enter the profession of nursing through a sense of vocation rather than a career¹. Nightingale was very firm on how nurses should view their work and Lucy Osburn brought this ethos to Australia when she arrived in 1867. Nightingale “looked upon nursing as the highest employment a woman could take up...To her it was a holy mission and should be entered into in a spirit of devotion – a sacred calling”². They were subservient to doctors and absolutely obedient to the Matrons and Senior Sisters. The ethos of a nurse’s learning was as much about her character and ability to follow strict discipline, being obedient and humble, as her ability to nurse patients and treat wounds³.

The establishment of Nightingale nursing in Australia instilled the virtues Nightingale found particularly important in a professional nurse; orderliness and deportment were indispensable qualities⁴. Nightingale nurses embodied many practices and values of a religious sisterhood, yet were not affiliated with any specific religion or denomination⁵. Instilling the values was important to retain absolute control over the women. Nightingale accepted the theory that disease was spread by miasmas in the air and therefore she believed that cleanliness was a top priority in hospitals⁶. She considered that cleanliness was “...essential in continuation of the patients’ good health”⁷. Germ theory replaced this as a reason for the spread of disease in subsequent years; however, the cleanliness of the hospitals and their patients continued to assist in the improvement of health⁸.

The Nightingale values, formed in the 1850s, were still adhered to almost 100

¹ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 67

² Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 85

³ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 45

⁴ Sim, *Apprentice in Black Stockings*, 45

⁵ Godden, *Lucy Osburn*, 85

⁶ Nelson and Rafferty, *Notes on Nightingale*, 86

⁷ Sim, *Apprentice in Black stockings*, 61

⁸ Nelson and Rafferty, *Notes on Nightingale*, 87

years later and the women who nursed in World War II carried the values and attitudes of their training and experience with them. In 1941, nursing continued to be an acceptable career for women in Australia, who wanted to contribute to the war effort and to see something of the world. The specifically limited field of employment choices available to women meant that nursing provided the only entry into service close to the battlefield during World War II, and created an outlet for the women's own sense of patriotism, enabling them to feel that they were doing their part for king and country⁹. Florence Trotter, one of the nurses evacuated from Singapore on the *Vyner Brooke*, stated that "well, I felt that if there was a war on and people needed nursing I wanted to be part of that – I wanted to look after them"¹⁰. But some were also motivated by a spirit of adventure. Wilma Oram stated that, "I think everyone was rushing off to join up...It was a bit glamorous, an overseas trip. You go to war and never in your wildest dreams expect to die"¹¹. Their desire to contribute to the war effort was so strong that many nurses arrived with no money or in debt due to the inadequate allowances for clothing and equipment. It was estimated that this cost 80 pounds, but the Australian women only received 40 pounds from the army and 10 pounds from the Red Cross and comfort fund as an equipment allowance before they went to war¹².

A national identity derived from the already-established mythology of the ANZAC was incorporated into the nursing ethos. This informed their views of patriotism and reinforced many elements of this mythology, such as the larrikin humour, more normally associated with the male digger, which became a form of rebellion against the close control of their supervisors. This was demonstrated by the nurses through their own version of female 'mateship' based on their camaraderie and kinship. Their inclusion in the armed forces created an outlet for the women's sense of patriotism and their training produced a cohesive group¹³. As Christina Twomey has observed, "By the mid-twentieth century in Australia, there were well-developed links between military service, sacrifice and nation"¹⁴.

⁹ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 113. See also, Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 122

¹⁰ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 10

¹¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 35

¹² Bassett, *Guns and Brooches* 134 – taken from "R M Downes Interim report on a visit of inspection of A.I.F medical services in Malaya"

¹³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 11

¹⁴ Twomey, *Australia's forgotten prisoners*, 16

The ethos of the nurses is exemplified through their patient-first principle, their duty as members of the AANS and their 'keep working' mentality. The Australian women went to war in such uncertain times that they had to rely on their sense of duty and were professionally trained according to this ethos¹⁵. Their training to put the needs of their patients and even other internees before their own held up even in the direst of circumstances. The societal conventions of the 1940s had to be adhered to, so the Matron had total control over the women. They were "...women who trained as nurses under a 'formal, hierarchical structure in which the intricate web of authority and accountability were clearly defined and understood'"¹⁶.

Their work ethic meant that the nurses remained focused and busy, which strengthened the fortitude of the group and became a tactic of survival during their long internment. It also became a coping mechanism as they would get on with the task at hand and keep busy, rather than focusing on their imprisonment. The nurses retained a sense of loyalty to their units and to Australia and this group identity further demonstrated the strong ethos amongst the women. Kenny has observed that:

The thirty-eight Australian Army nurses who became POWs during World War Two exhibited strength, courage, cohesion and a sense of identity that overcame differences in personalities. They positively and effectively combated the adverse circumstances that sorely tried their survival measures¹⁷.

Their strict discipline and work ethic meant that "everyone liked the nurses ... they were representative of the best of the young nation's womanhood They were keen to get on with the job for which they had enlisted"¹⁸. Due to censorship regulations they embarked without any knowledge of where they would be taken, and most were disappointed to learn their destination was Singapore and not the Middle East where the war was being actively fought¹⁹. This indicated their keenness to serve their country by working in a battle zone.

¹⁵ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

¹⁶ Williams, *Victoria's Living Memorial*, xvi

¹⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 161

¹⁸ Kenny *Captives* 5

¹⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 16

During the journey to Singapore the nurses commenced working in the ship's hospital, attending lectures on tropical diseases and adhering to the societal ethos of 1940s society where the nurses travelled in pairs and were not to be seen with the soldiers alone. The surveillance of the nurses continued during their transportation. Any difficulties they faced adjusting to the military experience were overcome on the journey to Singapore²⁰.

After their arrival in 1941 the Australian women were amazed to find there was no urgent need for them, especially knowing the dire need for medical assistance in the European theatre of war²¹. The facilities were not up to Australian standard and the equipment for the hospitals did not arrive with the nurses so initially they had to borrow instruments from the civilian hospitals to equip the theatres²². Their lifestyle was relaxed and they spent their working hours establishing hospitals in Singapore and Malacca. Their main job was to relieve other nurses on duty at the main army hospital the 2/10th AGH in Malacca²³. Jessie Blanch recollected that:

....we were nearly 12 months in Malacca and we had quite a nice time. Plenty of leave, and we didn't have much nursing to do – but the boys did have accidents and they needed attention. A lot of malaria, of course, from the mosquitoes²⁴.

They were given free time around their nursing duties and often felt more like tourists than members of an army unit. Their off duty time, however, was closely monitored and there were specific rules on what they could and could not do. They had to remain in uniform and travel in pairs or in a foursome with officers, as they were not allowed to socialise with lower ranked soldiers²⁵. If they were caught fraternizing with the enlisted men they could be confined to barracks²⁶. Phyllis Pugh, one of the sisters who worked as part of the 13th AGH, recollected that:

We were only allowed out three nights a week and had to be in by 23.59. Our C.O. did not confine any culprit only to barracks for a

²⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, 3

²¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 12

²² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 29

²³ Simons, *While history passed*, 2

²⁴ Blanch interview transcript, page 1. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 2

²⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 13

²⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 35

fortnight but the whole nursing staff. This was most effective and we didn't break the rules. The upshot was besides being well-trained we were physically very fit²⁷.

The ethos of the Senior Sister Kit Kinsella and Matrons Irene Drummond and Irene Paschke, their good humour, inspirational working attitude and concern for patients filtered through the group of nurses²⁸. Vivian Bullwinkel made particular mention of the influence of Irene Drummond in her pre-war training and considered that her "professional competence commanded the respect of the medical and nursing staff of the hospital while the soft, motherly side to her nature endeared her to the younger trainees"²⁹. In Singapore, Drummond was described as having her staff finely-tuned and her expert attention was provided at all times³⁰. Matron Olive Paschke was remembered as possessing "an acute sense of responsibility towards her nurses"³¹. Betty Jeffrey explained that, "Her boundless energy, her planning and foresight, her organising and administering ability made her...one of the most outstanding personalities in the AANS during those early years of World War II"³². The Sisters-in-charge personified the virtues instilled in nursing training by the Osburn-instituted Nightingale system. Cleanliness was a top priority, strict supervision of the Australian women was adhered to and the needs of the patient always came first. The nurses' professional values in the hospital and the CCS were apparent in the care of their patients, the management of the wards and in the training they gave to the orderlies. This had a positive effect on the morale of the troops³³. The trained nurses who joined the AANS were already disciplined because of their training. They had respect and faith in their Matrons and accepted and carried out their orders³⁴.

In the face of the oncoming Japanese Army, the nurses maintained that their job was to keep patients cheerful and optimistic³⁵. Pat Gunther recalled an incident when the hospital she was working in was being bombed and Major CR Furner, working next to her, said "for heaven's sake sister, get under the

²⁷ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 117

²⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 98

²⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 5

³⁰ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 19

³¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 12

³² Goodman, *Our War Nurses*, 147

³³ Kenny, *Captives*, 5

³⁴ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 23

³⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 48

table'. I replied 'There is no way I can do the dressing there and get my work finished'"³⁶. There was a close bond evident between the Australian nurses and the soldiers. The Australian women would often fill the role of mother, sister or girlfriend to the injured men³⁷. Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy would sing to the frightened soldiers providing a link back to Australia for the injured men (Appendix 2, figure 9)³⁸.

General Bennett did not want the nurses to evacuate because he feared the negative effect their departure would have on the soldiers. He considered that, "The nurses are wonderful, full of keenness and thoroughly efficient. They worked hard in this change-over from peaceful conditions to those needed for battle"³⁹. Ultimately, the order to evacuate was given and the Australian nurses were forced to abandon the wounded to an unknown and potentially merciless enemy⁴⁰. They hindered the evacuation plans by refusing to leave their patients, which is regarded as the most important quality of a nurse. The patient-first ethos meant they could not give up their nursing principles to save themselves. The Australian women wanted to stay because this was what they had trained for, had enlisted for and were mentally prepared for. Just as the war came to Singapore and they could put their training into practice they were being forced to leave when they were needed the most. The women did not want to walk out on the badly wounded soldiers⁴¹.

In her biography *Portrait of a Nurse* Pat Darling (nee Gunther) described the evacuation meeting at which Matrons Paschke and Drummonds asked for volunteers to evacuate:

Matron called us together. She said she had been ordered to send half of the Sisters out of Singapore. She asked for those of us who were prepared to stay to move to one side. This we did in one body. She then had the wretched task of choosing whom to send⁴².

³⁶ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 17

³⁷ Damousi and Lake, *Gender and War*, 53

³⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 86

³⁹ Bennett, *Why Singapore Fell*, 80

⁴⁰ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 120 – Jessie Blanch

⁴¹ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 22

⁴² Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 17

Gunther's sentiment is reinforced in a number of the nurses' memoirs. Betty Jeffrey deliberately avoided the meeting by staying with her patients⁴³. Pearl Mittelheuser tossed a coin to see who would leave on the *Wah Sui*; no one knew the result as she grabbed the coin mid-air, told the nurses she was standing with that she had lost and went back to work (Appendix 2, figure 11)⁴⁴. Jessie Simons wrote that "...the suggestion that we pull out and abandon our patients sent up our blood pressure. When the call was made for volunteers among the nurses to stay behind, we all volunteered"⁴⁵. The Australians saw the evacuation of the hospital as "...the ultimate neglect of their deepest duty, of care for the patient"⁴⁶. Vivian Bullwinkel reiterated that she "...felt a sudden rush of guilt...She was running away. They were leaving these boys to the Japanese; turning their backs on them at a time when they were needed the most. Orders or not, it was wrong..."⁴⁷

Matron Drummond explained to the women that evacuation was against her wishes and she had tried to have the orders rescinded⁴⁸. The nurses openly protested about leaving their patients; they maintained there would not be enough personnel to carry out the proper care of the sick and injured, to dispense medicine and change bandages⁴⁹. Each nurse steadfastly refused to go. Matron Paschke was therefore forced to assume seniority, taking dictatorial control by dividing the women into two groups⁵⁰. Despite their best attempts to stay with their patients they were ultimately compelled to evacuate⁵¹. The overriding sentiment of all of the nurses was abhorrence at being forced to leave their patients. This meant neglecting their duties and going directly against their patient first ethos⁵². The nurses considered that it was a "dreadful business" to walk out on the men when they were needed the most⁵³.

⁴³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 107

⁴⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 105

⁴⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 6

⁴⁶ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

⁴⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 52

⁴⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 56

⁴⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 47

⁵⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 51

⁵¹ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 139

⁵² McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

⁵³ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 112

On reflection many of the Australian women wrote that it was the worst moment of their lives when they had to leave their patients⁵⁴. Betty Jeffrey wrote: "I have never felt worse about anything"⁵⁵. Veronica Clancy stated that, "I think this was the saddest moment of my life, just when our services were so urgently needed we were made to leave...Even now I feel that it was our duty to stay with our patients and not leave them in their hours of need"⁵⁶. Florence Trotter also stated that, "They [soldiers] needed our care and we just felt that it was shocking. It was one of the worst things, I think, that we've ever done, we felt...walking out on those men who really needed us"⁵⁷. There were many emotional farewells between the Australian nurses and their patients, the women walked to the waiting ambulances with tears streaming down their faces⁵⁸. The remaining nurses left Singapore on the *Vyner Brooke* and continued nursing on the wharf as civilians rushed to leave before Singapore fell to the Japanese.

The Australian nurses' "keep-working" mentality on the wharf is recorded in Geoffrey Brookes *Singapore's Dunkirk*. He explains the nurses' fortitude, as quoted by a Naval Officer who was helping the evacuation process, and described how the "nurses behaved superbly"⁵⁹:

The incident that stands out most in my mind of these last hours was the magnificent bravery and fortitude of a group of Australian nurses who were waiting their turn to be evacuated...These brave nurses were always the first to answer calls for assistance and by their bearing and spirit were stark contrast to some of the opposite sex⁶⁰.

For the trained Australian nurses to panic in this scenario was unthinkable, especially as they were led by their Matrons and Senior Sisters.

On board the ship, the nurses were incensed that civilians, especially those with children, had not heeded the call to evacuate Singapore earlier. While these feelings were strong they were kept among the nurses. Jessie Simons wrote that, "I was ... angry with parents who had not had the foresight to

⁵⁴ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 19

⁵⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 3

⁵⁶ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 139

⁵⁷ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 10

⁵⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 113

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Brooke, *Singapore's Dunkirk*, (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, 2003), 32

⁶⁰ Brooke, *Singapore's Dunkirk*, 32

evacuate earlier the many children who were now suffering dumbly for their parents' unwisdom"⁶¹.

The nurses prepared for a possible Japanese attack. The evacuation process was handled by Paschke and Drummond who organised the nurses into district nursing teams responsible for certain areas of the ship. Each Sister was to ensure proper discipline was maintained and that good morale and hygiene existed for their fellow passengers⁶². They had strict instructions that if the ship was bombed the nurses had to help the civilians evacuate and ensure everyone was safe⁶³. They were allowed to leave only when one or other of the Matrons gave the order⁶⁴. There were not enough lifeboats so priority was given to civilians and all nurses able to swim were required to do so⁶⁵. "They knew what to do if the ship was attacked, and they accepted the fact that the safety of the other passengers, the wounded and children, must come first"⁶⁶.

Consequently, when the *Vyner Brooke* was bombed by Japanese aircraft on 14 February 1942, the nurses were able to assess wounds without panic and went to their designated areas of the ship, taking charge of the civilians who gathered there⁶⁷. The nursing ethos of strict discipline was evident during the evacuation, as the nurses helped the wounded without constant orders from their leaders⁶⁸. There was a great deal of confusion for the civilians on board, but not the nurses who followed their instructions to the letter and were the last to leave the sinking ship⁶⁹. As Jessie Blanch, recalled:

... we all knew what we had to do. I had a bag of dressings. Another sister had hypodermic needles with morphia. Each of us had different things. We went about the ship attending to the wounded and there wasn't a sound. We knew where we were going and didn't need to have orders yelled at us⁷⁰.

⁶¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 34

⁶² Kenny, *Captives*, 29

⁶³ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 120

⁶⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 133

⁶⁵ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

⁶⁶ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 23

⁶⁷ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 2. See also Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 154

⁶⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 57

⁶⁹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 58

⁷⁰ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

The nurses continued to work in the water after the ship was sunk. One of the senior nurses, Mavis Hannah, decided to set an example and remained in the ocean, even though she could not swim, to ensure injured patients could stay on the raft⁷¹. On her raft Matron Paschke relieved two Malay sailors from their duties in the water by replacing them with Australian nurses who had been helping children on board⁷². A roster was organised to check the wounded, with Iole Harper putting people into shifts to ensure no one person did more work than others⁷³.

The nurses who arrived first on shore treated the wounded with the limited resources they managed to carry from the ship after evacuation. A group of civilian men and women decided to leave the group to find help or to surrender to the Japanese. The nurses would not leave the wounded and elderly to fend for themselves⁷⁴. Matron Drummond told the Sisters that it was their duty to remain with their patients, reminding them that:

...there were wounded lying behind them who were relying on the sisters of the AANS for both support and succour...everything in their training and everything they stood for and believed in meant that they could not abandon their patients, even if the consequences of fulfilling the oath they all took were too horrible to contemplate. 'Where there is life there is hope' she said, and the little group fell silent⁷⁵.

These women were the group massacred on Radji Beach.

Prisoners of War

The remaining sisters were soon captured by the Japanese and placed in a prisoner of war camp. The first difficulty of internment for the nurses was the refusal of the Japanese to acknowledge they were part of the military service⁷⁶. A number of the nurses arrived partly naked after using their uniforms as sails on crude life rafts or to bandage the wounded⁷⁷. This lack of uniform worked against their argument of being military personnel⁷⁸. The second difficulty was

⁷¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 173

⁷² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 57

⁷³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 185

⁷⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 208

⁷⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 215. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 78

⁷⁶ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 115

⁷⁷ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 5

⁷⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 66

that the nurses' leaders, Olive Paschke, Irene Drummond and Kit Kinsella had died or were missing. The nurses were faced with an entirely new situation; they did not know who should take control and make decisions as their chain of command was now broken. They were left disorganised, a situation they weren't accustomed to, because of their training and discipline⁷⁹. Jessie Simons commented that, "As yet we had developed little camp organisation, and our decisions are made by the crude democracy of everyone talking at once"⁸⁰. This compelled the internees to develop a community organisation. Each house group appointed a captain who acted as spokesperson to the guards or officials and represented the house during community meetings. So, despite the loss of leadership, their training helped them to adopt a solution.

Before imprisonment the women had functioned together and were able to quickly bond as a group and implement their work ethos into camp life. The strict discipline of their nurse training with long hours and often stressful duties meant the nurses easily adapted to their new environment coping with the harsh treatment of internment⁸¹. The nurses' ability to keep working and remain productive under the trying conditions occurred because they had a "...natural cohesion and the discipline of their calling which meant they acted in a professional and social capacity"⁸². From this working ethos a new camp leadership emerged as the women who could save lives, like the nurses and doctors, were regarded as the most important because they were able to mediate problems that affected the whole camp in a communal way⁸³. As the nurses were shipwrecked they brought few possessions into camp. Out of necessity they had to work to buy food, which established ingenuity in the face of hardship and kept the nurses busy during the days. Jessie Blanch explained that:

All I had was a uniform, no shoes, I had a comb and a nail file in my pocket. And that was my worldly possessions. And we were all the same. So we thought [we'd] do something about it. We were divided into three, three of us did the cooking for the lot. Flo Trotter and I were in

⁷⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 32

⁸⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 32

⁸¹ Williams, *Victoria's Living Memorial*, 30

⁸² Kenny, *Captives*, 68

⁸³ Kenny, *Captives*, 55

this squad. And then the other girls would take turns. Then we had a bit of nursing to do, of the people in the camp⁸⁴.

The organisation and discipline, reflective of their earlier training, was established in every camp they moved to. The nurses took an active part in camp life especially in the beginning of internment when the civilian internees were not as organised⁸⁵. Betty Jeffrey quipped that “Our days are now organised properly – trust nurses”⁸⁶. The nurses quickly returned to their normal work ethic, settling into a daily routine, which included the house chores of cooking and cleaning⁸⁷. The Acting Sister compiled a list of duties, together with a daily team roster of tasks, which the nurses carried out⁸⁸. As the Dutch nuns had accepted the task of running the hospital, they rostered 10 sisters to assist them and the remaining sisters took on district nursing duties⁸⁹. It was useful as a back up to the hospital “...which did not have the capacity to attend to the rising number of medical cases”⁹⁰. This task meant visiting internees who were not sick enough to be admitted to hospital⁹¹. They would see these patients twice daily in their rooms to change dressings or sponge them clean⁹². The nurses “...gave advice and more importantly cared for those who did not have any other support”⁹³.

Their need to continue nursing is evident in their memoirs⁹⁴. Initially the Australian women nursed their own members, injured during the evacuation of the *Vyner Brooke*. Wilma Oram had sustained a serious head wound from falling debris and other nurses had skinned hands from rope burns and were unable to look after themselves as their wounds were bandaged⁹⁵. Throughout internment they were expected to work even when they were sick⁹⁶. Ashton had three separate attacks of acute abdominal pain, which was diagnosed as chronic appendicitis. Rather than taking bed rest she was reduced to light

⁸⁴ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁸⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 66

⁸⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 42

⁸⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 38

⁸⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 116 and 126

⁸⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 147. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4 and page 11

⁹⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 130

⁹¹ Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 105

⁹² Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 18

⁹³ Kenny, *Captives*, 71

⁹⁴ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 111

⁹⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 75

⁹⁶ Kenny, *Captives*, 86

duties until she was well enough to work again. She did not have an operation during internment to resolve this health issue⁹⁷. After recovering from an attack of malaria, which saw her hospitalised, Oram resumed light duties once her health improved⁹⁸. In the later years of internment, when the health of all of the internees had deteriorated, the nurses were released from their camp chores to assist the nuns in the hospital⁹⁹.

The nurses were always looking for inventive ways to source more food for those without money. They made food for a jumble sale and worked on the stalls with all proceeds going to aid the Camp Red Cross funds to help the destitute, even though they were themselves destitute¹⁰⁰. They would share food and luxuries they could source or find; even in 1945 when all of the women were sick, they gave provisions to those weaker than themselves¹⁰¹. Consequently the nurses were called on for any number of jobs as the civilian internees tended to take advantage of their usefulness and willingness¹⁰².

The survival skills the nurses developed owed much to their continued working ethos and assisted the emergence of a group solidarity, especially when there was little actual nursing they could do because of the lack of medicines, disinfectants and equipment¹⁰³. They created a routine to remain productive. As Betty Jeffrey remarked, "It would be so easy to flop round the place and relax completely, but as well as being hopelessly boring this would not do anybody any good"¹⁰⁴. While they did not always get along with each other they were used to living together under their previous training regime. They worked together in difficult conditions and circumstances so were able to retain group loyalty. They adapted to a routine faster than the civilians who did not have the same group discipline before their imprisonment. Among the civilian population the duties and responsibilities were rotated to ensure no one person "...could assume absolute power. Because members of the AANS...already followed an established order, no such rotation was necessary

⁹⁷ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 47

⁹⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 157

⁹⁹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 141

¹⁰⁰ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 22

¹⁰¹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 542

¹⁰² Kenny, *Captives*, 66

¹⁰³ Kenny, *Captives*, 46. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 62

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 106

for them”¹⁰⁵. The group loyalty and discipline was part of the ethos that kept the Australian nurses focused on their survival¹⁰⁶.

As conditions worsened in the camps, the price of food on the black market became exorbitant and the nurses couldn’t raise enough money to buy food with sufficient protein for their diet. They were forced to take on chores other internees refused like working in the sanitary squad. They would earn 80 cents a day, often working double shifts so they would not lose money if they became ill¹⁰⁷. Jeffery stated that:

We Australians have done more than our fair share of chopping trees, digging drains and clearing roadways for the last three years...We are working ourselves to a standstill nursing and doing our own chores in order to make life more bearable¹⁰⁸.

Every time the women moved camp, a new hospital had to be established. The Australian women would assist in its establishment before settling into camp life and organising the district nursing duties¹⁰⁹. They were also required to take the stretcher cases to waiting boats during a camp move, even when they were sick and physically exhausted. Jeffrey wrote that, “half a dozen of our sisters were stretcher bearers and walked that pier many times carrying and helping those too ill to walk. How they kept it up nobody knows”¹¹⁰. The patient first ethos, so important to their training, continued throughout internment. They would work with the nuns to ensure they provided the best possible care for the sick. Veronica Clancy, who was ill during a camp move and unable to help, commented that from her position she “...could see the nuns and our sisters carrying the sick down the steps in their arms; it was impossible to use the stretchers because the stairway was too steep and the boat too small”¹¹¹. Despite their own weariness, they were able to move the very sick to ensure the group stayed together.

¹⁰⁵ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 119

¹⁰⁶ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 541

¹⁰⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 85

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 171

¹⁰⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 163

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 156

¹¹¹ Veronica Clancy as cited in Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 164

The Philosophy that maintained the ethos

The Australian nurses attempted to make the best out of the circumstances either individually or through reliance on each other¹¹². Jessie Blanch commented that, “The Australian girls were marvellous. Morale was high.... Now, looking back, we weren’t bored. There was always something to think about and always something to do. And somebody to talk to”¹¹³. This comment by Blanch is mediated by many years and is a retrospective look at their time during internment, rather than a comment made as they were enduring the difficult living conditions. The keep-working mentality, despite the futility of their hard work, meant they were able to keep hope alive for themselves and their patients. This is evidenced by the working relationship between Jessie Simons and Mavis Hannah whose strong friendship and business enterprise gave them both the hope that they might survive internment¹¹⁴.

The longevity of their imprisonment further solidified the strength of the group. Catherine Kenny wrote that, “Their pre-war friendships intensified under conditions of deprivation. The differences of opinion and disagreements during captivity were unimportant compared to the unifying spirit of these women and the problems of surviving another day”¹¹⁵. The technique of counselling each other, identified in their earlier training when they discussed the difficulties of their day at the end of their shift, continued to assist the nurses during internment. The group support meant they did not face internment, as a number of civilians did, on their own. Individual techniques of survival were also evident. Wilma Oram said she would mentally remove herself from the scenario if she felt threatened or if her spirits were down¹¹⁶. Another of the techniques she developed was stoicism in the face of the depravity. She had a single-minded determination to survive internment and got satisfaction from helping others¹¹⁷.

These specific philosophies developed by the internees were particularly important when dealing with the captor’s irrational reaction to the women. As

¹¹² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 245

¹¹³ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 5

¹¹⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 108

¹¹⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 160

¹¹⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 106

¹¹⁷ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 106

a group they “...decided that a policy of politeness and apparent submission, together with plenty of bowing and obedience, [was their] only hope”¹¹⁸. The group mentality of the Australian women was an understanding that the Japanese could starve them and restrict their freedom but they could not conquer their spirit¹¹⁹. The reaction to their imprisonment through their strong working ethos meant that they could develop specific techniques of survival that “formed strong bonds of loyalty and identity”¹²⁰. These techniques also safeguarded the women against the degradation of living in the camp and the lack of privacy ensuring they could carry on their lives. Wilma Oram explained that:

The fact that you have to go to the toilet and wash and so forth, does it really matter? Everybody has to do that...you keep your brain ticking over and thinking. That’s where the privacy comes, in your own particular way of looking at life. Nobody can alter or intrude on that if you don’t want them too; not even the guards¹²¹.

Deterioration of health

The keep-working ethos is highlighted in a number of the Australian nurses’ stories. Betty Jeffrey wrote in her prison diary that,

...it is getting increasingly difficult to go on nursing in the hospital. Quite often Jean Ashton and Wilma Oram do double hospital duty in one day because someone has suddenly been stricken in our hut. These two girls must be made of cast iron. Jean has worked like a slave ever since she was taken prisoner¹²².

The nursing conditions were primitive and sanitation and hygiene, pivotal points of their nursing training, were eroded by the sickness and lethargy of the group. “No antiseptics, little ordinary cleanliness and generally unhygienic conditions which once would have appalled me professionally, just had to be accepted as inevitable”¹²³. Sickness such as beri beri and malaria became so prevalent that few took notice of them and continued to work while ill¹²⁴.

¹¹⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 21

¹¹⁹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 550

¹²⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, xi

¹²¹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 105

¹²² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 178

¹²³ Simons, *While history passed*, 107

¹²⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 84

Jeffrey commented that, "...it is extraordinary how a person can have malaria and a temp of over 104 every week or so and yet be able to work between bouts of it"¹²⁵. Those in stronger health would often work double time because so many of the other nurses were sick¹²⁶. Nursing became a thankless task in the difficult conditions, yet it was the caring attitude to their patients, which gave hope¹²⁷. Wilma Oram said that:

...first we were buoyed up by hope. We always kept hope but it got harder and harder when our health deteriorated more and more. Sickness just overcame us. So much dysentery, and this malaria and Banka fever that people had and some of the people had cancers and they were dying of those as well. And there was nothing we could do for them¹²⁸.

As the hospitals became full to overflowing the nurses district nursing duties increased as only very sick cases could be admitted to hospital¹²⁹. The nursing was hard in the difficult conditions, "We have discovered that no matter how ill a person is she can't afford to miss her rice. If they absolutely refuse and make it impossible for us they soon die. It is very grim nursing"¹³⁰. Mavis Hannah and Jessie Simons, in an attempt to help the group, boiled water in the open after dark to be used for the sick and were subsequently bitten by mosquitoes and contracted malaria. They carried on as best they could but were never free from the recurrent attacks until after their release; even then many suffered the effects of the disease for the rest of their lives¹³¹. So, while this ethos of working and caring for the other internees buoyed the nurses up mentally, it resulted in the faster deterioration of their physical health.

In the final camp in 1945 a number of the nurses succumbed to their fatigue. They could work for only an hour at a time, so deficient were they in health and energy. Those able to continue district nursing duties were expected to look after up to forty women in the huts. The debilitating diseases they suffered from inhibited their movement and ultimately a number were forced

¹²⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 147

¹²⁶ Kenny, *Captives*, 95

¹²⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 69

¹²⁸ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 13

¹²⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 71

¹³⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 167

¹³¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 89

to stop nursing¹³². The camp chores were now allocated based on individual strength¹³³.

Everyone was ill, but those who could still stagger took up the responsibilities of all, cooking, chopping wood, carrying water, painfully dying on our feet...The various camp jobs were divided amongst us accorded to our estimated strength and abilities¹³⁴.

The nurses were able to adapt to the conditions they faced and to overcome most hardships; the only difficulty they could not overcome was the inadequate diet¹³⁵. Being trained health professionals the nurses were more aware than most of the civilians of the health issues that were caused by the insufficient food intake and unbalanced diet¹³⁶. They knew which diseases could be cured, and that the malaria nearly all of the internees suffered from could be controlled with quinine. This became a complex form of torture for the nurses, who knew that their bodies were shutting down and what was required to fix them was unobtainable. Jeffery recorded in her diary that:

Sisters now have malaria quite badly, we are all so tired, we are hoping and praying for our freedom. If it doesn't happen soon we shall be messes for the rest of our lives. You can't treat tropical fevers, ulcers etc., on this diet and lack of water; it just won't work¹³⁷.

Uniforms

The nurses' uniforms became a symbol of the unity of the group. The reverence they showed towards the uniform was a reflection of how close knit the group was and an illustration of their identity as nurses, as part of the army and as Australians. "Throughout the War, the captured nurses clung desperately to the belief that their military status, symbolized by their tattered uniforms might protect them"¹³⁸. Sister Clancy considered that the Australian women might have been better treated if they had been captured in their uniforms making it easier for their status as military officers to be recognised. "At least we would have had clothes and money and our men to help us and

¹³² Kenny, *Captives*, 93

¹³³ Kenny, *Captives*, 93. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 7

¹³⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 86

¹³⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 70

¹³⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 253

¹³⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 148

¹³⁸ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 141

the story of the massacre...would have never been written”¹³⁹. The uniforms were worn to reinforce the collective ethos of the group when they were called upon to be comfort women for the Japanese¹⁴⁰.

Despite the lack of clothing, their uniforms were not worn daily, only on specific occasions. Betty Jeffrey humorously refers to their uniforms during inspection, “We dashed inside, folded our uniforms neatly and were ready for inspection!” highlighting again the few possessions the nurses had¹⁴¹. They were worn during camp moves in the hope a sympathizer would notice the women and report their location to authorities¹⁴². Trotter stated that “...we felt as the years went on, that if they saw a group of people dressed in grey they were more likely to remember you than if you all in just all sorts of clothes...”¹⁴³.

When nurses died, their colleagues wore uniforms at the funeral, and they also acted as a burial shroud¹⁴⁴. Another example of the nurses’ solidarity was their difficulty in accepting that some of them would not return home:

Somehow the nurses had never believed they would lose one of their members. The tragedy brought them together and they decided to break out their nursing uniforms...These were put on and the nurses carried the coffin outside the wire to perform a military burial¹⁴⁵.

The Australian women dug the graves and ensured their colleagues were buried in their AANS uniforms¹⁴⁶.

The uniforms were also carefully preserved for the day they were released¹⁴⁷. All of the nurses spent time attempting to make their uniforms look as presentable as they could¹⁴⁸. At the conclusion of the War when they were freed they wore what remained of their uniforms¹⁴⁹.

¹³⁹ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 141

¹⁴⁰ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 110

¹⁴¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 103

¹⁴² Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 82

¹⁴³ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 11

¹⁴⁴ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 11

¹⁴⁵ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 160

¹⁴⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 270

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 63. See also Kenny, *Captives*, 57. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 50. See also Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 80

¹⁴⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 284

¹⁴⁹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 190

Lennard and Brown reported with pride that the Australian Army nurses had dressed in their rags of uniforms and, looking terrible and smelling worse, had walked onto the train... “Yet their determination to get onto the train without help was silently evident, or, so I felt – they smiled at me in appreciation”... “You started to go forward to help them...and then suddenly stopped. You felt that even the small assistance might be resented...that they could manage.... Hadn’t they done so for four years...in a filthy Japanese Prisoner of War Camp?”¹⁵⁰

The women didn’t realise how tattered their uniforms had become until Major Harry Windsor, who was part of the rescue team, asked the group, “Where are the Australian Nurses?”¹⁵¹ He had been given enlistment photos of the women and could not recognise any of them¹⁵². Jessie Simons remarked that it was only when Windsor had made this comment that she realised “...how unrecognisable the remains of our old grey uniforms had become”¹⁵³. Photos taken of the women upon their release showed they had kept their buttons polished (Appendix 7, figure 24)¹⁵⁴.

Patriotism

This group of Australian nurses had grown up in an Australian society that revered ANZAC day, the ANZAC legend and the heroes of World War I. This was not only a motivating force for them to enlist, but also a driving force to remain patriotic during their time as prisoners of war. The mythology of the Australian Digger was revered, for, as Graham Seal has observed, they belonged “...[to] a set of attitudes and values within which notions of honour, duty, bravery, sacrifice and salvation are central, located particularly within a militaristic context”¹⁵⁵. Even though this concept is built around men and the masculine nature of Australians at war the women were raised in a society that perpetuated this mythology.

The Australian nurses went to war to do something important and useful for their country. The hostilities of their internment turned their colleagues into

¹⁵⁰ Kenny, *Captives*, 145

¹⁵¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 118

¹⁵² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 287

¹⁵³ Simons, *While history passed*, 119

¹⁵⁴ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 188.

¹⁵⁵ Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 4

family and they were proud of their role as Army nurses¹⁵⁶. The Australian women celebrated Anzac Day during the first years of their internment until they were overcome with grief for the day¹⁵⁷. This was not an event practised just by the nurses in the Pacific War; the Australian men also celebrated the day. "At Campo Concentramento No. 57 in Italy, the guards were persuaded to allow the Anzacs to celebrate what they were told was a religious day on 25 April 1943"¹⁵⁸. The 1943 ceremony left the women in tears and they decided informally not to celebrate it again until they were released¹⁵⁹. On the 14 February every year they held a short ceremony of two minutes silence to respect the anniversary of the women lost at sea when the *Vyner Brooke* was sunk¹⁶⁰.

In the information vacuum in which they lived there was little understanding of what was happening in the war. Betty Jeffrey described an Allied attack near their camp, which connected the women back to Australia:

Oh the thrill of it, and what it means...Very few of our girls admitted it, but I know their knees were knocking with excitement, as were mine...what a difference knowing it's our men bombing this time...We all hope our men shoot straight. It would be wretched luck to get a smack after all this¹⁶¹.

The title of 'Australian Army Nurse' was another way they could exhibit their sense of identity¹⁶². Throughout internment they retained loyalty to their military unit and to Australia¹⁶³. At the conclusion of the war Betty Jeffrey found a knapsack that had 'made in Australia' printed on it and lamented that "oh dear, so near and yet so far from!" Despite her frustration it was a way to connect the nurses back to Australia¹⁶⁴.

The greatest demonstration of the ethos of this group of nurses is the continuation of their nursing duties during evacuation and captivity. They

¹⁵⁶ Kenny, *Captives*, 161

¹⁵⁷ Kenny, *Captives* 60. See also "Blanchie" interview transcript, page 5

¹⁵⁸ Lindsay, *Spirit of the Digger*, 183

¹⁵⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 254

¹⁶⁰ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 38

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 115

¹⁶² Kenny, *Captives*, 161

¹⁶³ Kenny, *Captives*, 161

¹⁶⁴ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 71

worked during the capitulation of Singapore, on the *Vyner Brooke* and after its sinking, upon arrival on the shores of Bangka Island and during all the years of imprisonment. They continued nursing without medicines or equipment, without clothing to dress their patients or access to food and vitamins. They did this because it was their duty as nurses to keep working and put the needs of their patients above their own. They maintained endurance because they were members of an Army unit and their group was mutually supportive.

CHAPTER 6

Camaraderie

The camaraderie of the Australian nurses was essential to their survival. Their familiarity with and trust of one another as friends and colleagues demonstrated what this concept of camaraderie was. Their pre-war training and ethos fostered their loyalty to one another, the AANS and Australia and this in turn strengthened this comradeship. It was the women's version of male mateship and is identified in their memoirs through the terminology of 'friendship', 'kinship', 'allegiance' and 'reliance'. This strong sense of camaraderie continued to sustain them at the conclusion of the war and during their lives back in Australia. According to Catherine Kenny, "All the nurses accepted the responsibility of acting as a group and were wholehearted in their support for each other. Their response to deprivation was a positive adaptation to circumstances"¹.

The connection between the nurses was developed from their earlier days of living-in-training, which helped to foster a family like relationship among the women – a concept initiated by Nightingale through her training regime. Wilma Oram stated that, "It was compulsory to live in the nurse's quarters and, as a trainee, to obey everyone who had seniority... Pecking order in hospitals was firmly established from top to bottom and was not open to question"². They also lived together in Singapore and Malacca and spent much of their free time together, which allowed the friendships to further develop. Many of the Australian women had pre-war friendships, as they had trained together, and some, like Vivian Bullwinkel, had trained with the Matrons. This sense of familiarity meant the women bonded quickly and were able to rely on each other for support. The nature of their training and discipline strengthened the group resolve in the face of any adversity as they were used to long hours working and living together³.

¹ Kenny, *Captives*, xii

² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 30

³ A theme of the Australian Army as described in Patrick Lindsay's *Spirit of the Digger* is having respect for all ranks you worked with, that you are only as good as your last man (page 25). This reference is true for the nurses as well as "they were part of a close-knit and disciplined team" (De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 525)

During the evacuation of Singapore only 65 nurses boarded the *Vyner Brooke* and even though they were from different hospitals and units their collegiality and group identity as AANS bonded them together. They worked cohesively as one group and the ethos they employed while the harbour was attacked and during the sinking of the ship meant that this kinship was strengthened. They bonded further as their attentions turned to saving the lives of civilians. The Radji Beach massacre highlighted the group camaraderie as the nurses refused to leave each other, or their patients, to surrender to the Japanese. During internment, it was the threat of being forced to become comfort women and the potential violence from their captors which continued to fortify this group, bonding the remaining nurses together as their health and wellbeing deteriorated. The deliberate act by the captors of separating them from friends and family meant that the isolation of the group from the outside world ensured a stronger connection between the Australian nurses.

During the Crimean War this concept of camaraderie was evident in the relationships between Nightingale's nurses. In her book *No Place for Ladies*, Helen Rappaport stated that, "There was, undoubtedly, a strange kind of fierce and unspoken loyalty between these campaign hardened women. They bonded in the same way that the soldiers did and would not be separated from each other"⁴. The nurses of the *Vyner Brooke* had the same group loyalty and this nurtured a family-like relationship. The camaraderie they felt with one another took many different forms. One of these was larrikinism and it is evidenced in the friendship of nurses Mona Wilton and Wilma Oram (Appendix 2, figure 8). The term 'larrikin' is usually associated with men of the armed forces; despite their regimented lives the Australian nurses also used this form of humour; for the younger women it was a fun past time to bend the rules, while not quite breaking them. The two young nurses met on the first day of training, with Oram describing Wilton as 'Madcap Mona'⁵. Oram details how important this friendship was in preparation for leaving her family: "It helps such a lot to have a companion... Mona's sense of humour could overcome any of life's problems..."⁶ The journey by ship from Australia was an opportunity for friendships to begin as the women shared the excitement of heading off on an

⁴ Rappaport, *No Place for Ladies*, 129

⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 29

⁶ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 39

adventure together. As previously mentioned, their experience in Singapore before the end of 1941 was one of relative relaxation and leisure.

The camaraderie of the Australian women extended to the whole group. Their kinship was not bound by rank, as the Matrons did not think it was beneath them to ask for help from a subordinate. This became particularly important and apparent during the evacuation of the *Vyner Brooke*. As Matron Olive Paschke was unable to swim she had asked Betty Jeffrey specifically for her assistance⁷. When Paschke went overboard and came to the surface of the water there were a number of nurses waiting to help her onto a life raft⁸. Jean Ashton described the scene in her diary. "Planks and boards began to appear and quite a few of the girls bobbing about. We all swam together in groups and about 12 of us managed to grab an upturned boat. (Clancy, Hughes, Muir and I decided to stay together)"⁹. In the water, the nurses created small groups helping injured civilians and crew from the boats. They held impromptu meetings in the water where they shouted encouragement and advice to each other¹⁰. The group support became an important tactic of hope and survival in the ocean as they talked about their lives and their childhoods; they sang popular songs to keep their morale high and discussed plans for their lives¹¹. They also had conversations about what they would eat and drink when they reached the shore¹².

A story repeated in a number of the nurses' memoirs was that of Jenny Greer adding humour to the situation by singing "We're off to see the Wizard"¹³. Jessie Blanch recalled that:

Quite a lot of debris floated along. And along came a piece of the rail of the ship...Anyway there were three of us, and then we picked up another two girls, and by putting our hands on that rail we could swim together. Swim with one hand and kick. There were five of us: Jenny Greer, Beryl Woodbridge, Flo Trotter, Joyce Tweddell and me. Jenny's a bit of a wag. And as we got into a current, it took us quite quickly away

⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 171

⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 72

⁹ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 4

¹⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 16

¹¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 182

¹² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 11

¹³ Simons, *While history passed*, 16. See also, Angell, *A Woman's*, 59. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 2

and Jenny started to sing, “We’re off to see the Wizard”. We all joined in¹⁴.

The collegiality of the group is emphasised by the retelling of this humorous event, even while they were in such a difficult predicament. It is a tactic used in their memoirs to add whimsy to confronting situations¹⁵.

The strong currents meant that many of the nurses were separated from one another. Winnie May Davis and Pat Gunther were swept towards Jessie Simon’s group; there was no room left on the raft, but Simons could see that Gunther was struggling and slipped off to help her aboard (Appendix 2, figure 13, figure 15 and 16)¹⁶. This became a mutually supportive decision as Jessie Simons’ hands were badly burnt and Pat Gunther, working on the theory that a salve might protect them, used the lipstick she still held onto to provide some relief¹⁷. The women’s fatigue is highlighted in Simons’ memoirs when she stated that “...but for the encouragement of others...I would have let my tired arms and weakened will have their way”, conceding that without their support “...Davey Jones would have had another visitor for supper”¹⁸.

The reliance on each other ensured the survival of many of the nurses in the ocean, who felt unable to continue. Jessie Blanch recalled the story of a specific nurse. “One of the girls had had it and wanted to give up. We really roused at her and said, ‘We’ll get there, we’ll get there’”¹⁹. Blanch deliberately left out this nurse’s name, which is a common theme in the nurses’ recollections; they did not single out an individual if the comments made about them were derogatory or indicated weakness which they were often quite honest about. When the majority of the nurses were reunited on shore they sought each other out to retell the story of their survival and attempted to account for the whereabouts of their missing colleagues²⁰.

¹⁴ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

¹⁵ Wilma Oram’s close friend Mona Wilton was killed when the ship was sunk, “Wilma Oram went over the side with her friend Mona Wilton who was a non-swimmer...it took a little time for her to identify where she was and to begin swimming around looking for Mona” (Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 71). Jean Ashton explained that Mona was killed by one of the falling rafts and floated away (Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 60).

¹⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 17

¹⁷ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 24

¹⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 19

¹⁹ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 114

²⁰ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 194. See also Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 19

Iole Harper and Betty Jeffrey waved and called out to each other in the water²¹. The two nurses didn't know each other before this ordeal and became close friends after it. The bond created during this experience remained for all the years of captivity. When they arrived at the camp the other nurses were already attired in local outfits and they were greeted by one woman who said, "A bit haughty today aren't we, old thing?" On closer inspection they realised the women were their colleagues, Beryl Woodbridge and Jenny Greer. The reunion of the women felt "like a good old fashioned homecoming"²². Iole and Betty were physically exhausted, but still cheerful and the other nurses washed and fed them. It was during these early times in internment that the mutual support of the nurses was strengthened²³.

The friendship, loyalty and camaraderie of the nurses are exemplified by the events of the Radji Beach massacre and the reuniting of Vivian Bullwinkel with the other AANS members. As the Japanese soldiers ordered the nurses and one civilian woman to march towards the ocean; the nurses helped to support their injured friends Clare Halligan, Rosetta Wight and Flo Casson who could not stand unaided²⁴. The use of humour is evident, even as the women faced death, with Alma Beard who was standing closest to Vivian Bullwinkel saying "Bully, there are two things I've always hated in my life, the Japanese and the sea, and today I've ended up with both" (Appendix 2, figure 10)²⁵. The memoirs described the women stoically entering the water without crying out or pleading for mercy²⁶. Matron Drummond quietly told the nurses that she loved them, was proud of them and they didn't need to be afraid, again proving her worth as a Matron by showing a motherly attitude to her nurses and in turn they followed her orders²⁷.

The stories reinforce the group's sense of togetherness, showing that they had accepted the inevitable and walked calmly towards it. As mentioned in the second chapter, there are difficulties with this story; as Vivian Bullwinkel was the only survivor of the Radji Beach massacre the explanation of these events are almost totally from her perspective. Two men survived the earlier

²¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 12

²² Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 113

²³ Kenny, *Captives*, 38

²⁴ Crouch, *One life is ours*, 26

²⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 216

²⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 216

²⁷ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 536

bayonetting and were able to detail their own recollection of events, but not specifics of what happened to the nurses on Radji Beach²⁸.

When Bullwinkel, as the only survivor of the massacre, arrived at the internment camp she was overcome with emotion and cried as the other nurses questioned her for details of the nurses who had not returned²⁹. The women were horrified by her explanation and their decision to maintain silence about what happened to their colleagues at Radji Beach is also evidence of their strong group solidarity. Jeffrey wrote in her diary that, "After we heard this story we decided then and there never to mention it again; it would not do for it to go back to Japanese ears. The subject was strictly forbidden"³⁰. The nurses closed ranks around Vivian, pledging their silence; they would not discuss what she had been through or their own loss of friends on the beach. Despite their silence, their collective grief further bonded together this group of women. Bullwinkel created a fictitious story of shipwreck and survival, which the Japanese accepted as the truth³¹. The shared secrets, which were vital to keep, cemented their bonds³². Their ability to live by this code of silence was indicative of their loyalty to each other, but presented problems for later historians, seeking to uncover the full story, as discussed in Chapter 2. "Throughout their lives it was difficult to get any POW nurses to talk about the massacre. Once the pact of silence had been agreed, that silence became virtually unbreakable"³³. This sentiment was reiterated by a number of the nurses as Sylvia Muir stated, "We had to keep Vivian's secret. We had to adapt to circumstances or die"³⁴.

Comfort women

The episode of the comfort women is another example of the camaraderie of the group and the mutual code of silence maintained around a difficult issue. All of the nurses' accounts of this event described how they collectively stopped the enforced prostitution; they claimed that although other interned

²⁸ A civilian, Eric German, survived the Japanese bayonetting, like Bullwinkel he feigned death until the Japanese left, he refused to discuss the experience until after the conclusion of the war. Stoker, Earnest Lloyd, was unconscious after the attack and woke up in the sea water off Radji Beach (Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 219)

²⁹ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 3. Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 233

³⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 25

Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 233

³² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 79

³³ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 80

³⁴ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 539

women became comfort women, they did not. The voyeuristic nature of their captors became evident in the first few days of internment as the women were watched in the bathroom³⁵. After a few weeks an Officers' Club was opened and the nurses were told their attendance was mandatory³⁶. Their refusal would mean their food rations would be stopped³⁷. What is evident through the sources is the humour the nurses used when describing this terrifying event. Iole Harper stated that if the Japanese officers had planned to create a brothel then it should be named after the well-known red light district in Singapore 'Lavender Street'³⁸. The group laughed at her suggestion³⁹.

Jessie Blanch was asked to sign a piece of paper saying she agreed to entertain the Japanese officers:

I refused to sign. And he said 'N.O or K.N.O.W?' And I said 'K.N.O.W – and the answer is N.O!' I yelled at him and he yelled at me, we argued about this and I said I wouldn't sign. He said 'if you don't sign, you'll starve to death. We're going to starve all of the sisters'. And I said, 'As far as I'm concerned I'm not signing it. I'll die first'. He said, 'How will you die?' I said, 'I'll lie down and die!' Which was so stupid because I was so well at the time⁴⁰.

The other two women in this meeting, Nesta James and Winnie May Davis, also refused to sign the document. They felt miserable about their decision knowing they had put the health of the other nurses and potentially the camp at risk with the impending ration restrictions⁴¹.

But, in reality, the Australian nurses were at the mercy of the Japanese and without protection.⁴² They attempted to explain that they were nurses and part of the Australian Armed forces and not prostitutes⁴³. Their uniform could not protect them and they were pressured by their captors to hand over four

³⁵ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 117

³⁶ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 12. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 3

³⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 117

³⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 88. See also, Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 117

³⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 117

⁴⁰ Blanch gives her own insight into the way women are treated by the Japanese after this altercation saying that "The Japanese don't like you arguing with them because their women are very...they do what the Japanese tell them" (Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3)

⁴¹ Jessie Blanch Interview transcript, page 3. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 3

⁴² Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁴³ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 119

nurses as comfort women⁴⁴. Jessie Simons recalled, “It is hard to express our feeling of horror and helplessness under these most trying conditions...but we knew what had happened to the other girls on the beach, and we wanted to get home someday”⁴⁵. They held a meeting and decided the younger and prettier nurses would remain with the sick and the rest of the nurses would go as a group to the Officers Club⁴⁶. They discussed different tactics they could employ against their captors⁴⁷. One suggestion was to concentrate on just one man offering to play cards with him rather than becoming a plaything for all of them⁴⁸. Another nurse rationalised that they would not be able to stop what was about to happen and even if she was forced into prostitution it would not hurt the real her⁴⁹. The rest of the group all thought that response was dreadful⁵⁰. Again, while this story was related there was no name given to the nurse in question who made this statement, only the other nurses’ reaction to it.

The nurses made a pact that if anything happened the incident would never be mentioned. Betty Jeffrey wrote that, “...we should all swear never to mention it, or tell any tales about anyone if and when we were released”⁵¹. The silence they enforced about the Radji Beach massacre extended to this event as well⁵². The women felt their strength lay in numbers and set about deliberately making themselves look as unattractive as possible by wearing men’s clothes and putting dirt in their hair⁵³. The Japanese officers were surprised when the group of Australian women arrived, not just the four they had requested⁵⁴. “Our numbers made the [Japanese] romantic ideas a little difficult to put into practice and we densely refused to comprehend their poor English”⁵⁵. The Japanese officers could not understand why single women were allowed to leave Australia on their own without men. The nurses attempted to explain

⁴⁴ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 548

⁴⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 36

⁴⁶ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 546. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4

⁴⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 37

⁴⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 43

⁴⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 43

⁵⁰ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁵¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 31

⁵² Kenny, *Captives*, 43

⁵³ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 546. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 37. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 120

⁵⁴ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁵⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 37

that they were there to attend to the sick; this argument was futile as the Japanese had the incorrect assumption as to why women were in the army⁵⁶.

The accounts in the nurses' memoirs include a humorous explanation of the events despite the serious situation the women were in. Blanche Hempstead is a specific focus in a number of the stories (Appendix 2, figure 12). They had agreed as a group to not accept liquor from the Japanese. When one enquired what Australian women drank, Hempstead who "...could drink and swear with the best of the cattle drivers, replied in a sweetly innocent voice that 'Australian girls were nice and did not drink alcohol...'" this statement bringing much mirth from the nurses who heard it, "if Vivian had not controlled herself she would have burst out laughing at this ridiculous statement"⁵⁷.

Jessie Simons also referred to Hempstead's reaction. "The girl addressed had often drunk too much of what was not good for her.... Despite the gravity of our plight I nearly burst out laughing as I caught her eye"⁵⁸. Jessie Blanch retold a story that "...I had to smile, one very serious girl was sitting next to the Jap and talking about cherry blossoms. He wasn't very interested in cherry blossoms"⁵⁹. By using humour, these accounts make light of the danger these women were in. It was a tactic employed throughout internment and highlighted in their stories as a coping mechanism during and after the war. The perception of the events changed over the years and the nurses conceded as old women that they were frightened at the time and it was only retrospectively that the amusing tales were included⁶⁰. This point highlights how memory can change, be distorted or certain specifics of events forgotten over a period of time. It also highlights that circumstances or events, which had previously been important to conceal, such as fear, did not matter years later. While the memories may have changed, they still reinforce the importance of the group camaraderie by highlighting how the women stuck together in the face of adversity, even if this allegiance was a later construction of their time together.

The women refused the Japanese advances throughout the night and the majority were sent home with a small group forced to stay. They had been

⁵⁶ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 88

⁵⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 120

⁵⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 37

⁵⁹ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁶⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 92

chosen before the night began by the nurses for their apparent ability to outwit the Japanese⁶¹. The memoirs maintain that this group was finally allowed to return to the other nurses without incident⁶². Blanche Hempstead had a cough and pretended to have tuberculosis, barking and barking until the Japanese sent her home⁶³. Two other women kept their suitors walking up and down in front of the houses until they were exhausted and allowed to leave⁶⁴. The final woman who was taller than her suitor pushed him over and was released⁶⁵. This defiance gained them respite from the Japanese officers⁶⁶. However, the camp was ordered to withhold rations from the nurses⁶⁷. Jean Ashton and Nesta James complained to the Dutch Red Cross representative Doctor McDowell about their treatment⁶⁸. He reported the situation to the Senior Japanese officials in Palembang and the nurses were left alone⁶⁹. Iole Harper's explanation for the respite was that other women in the camp were willing to trade sex for favours from their captors so the Japanese decided not to bother with the nurses⁷⁰.

Despite the humorous tales written about this experience, there is an underlying theme of the mental anguish caused by this situation. Nell Algrove wrote that, "I really think the mental strain was far worse than being bombed or shipwrecked"⁷¹. Jessie Simons expressed a similar sentiment:

I think all the girls would agree that this club experience was the most repulsive and unpleasant in our whole imprisonment. I know it stands out grimly in our memories. For two weeks after this we were under enormous tension and became mentally worn with expectation⁷².

⁶¹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 546

⁶² Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁶³ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 3

⁶⁴ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 33

⁶⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 43

⁶⁶ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 110

⁶⁷ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 92

⁶⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 244

⁶⁹ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 110

⁷⁰ Kelly, *Captives*, 44

⁷¹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 546. See also *White Coolies*, 33

⁷² Simons, *While history passed*, 38

The women insisted nursing was the only work they were capable or willing to do⁷³. This event reinforced the group solidarity, as they understood their strength lay in sticking together⁷⁴.

The accounts of the events have come under scrutiny through confessions about the comfort women experiences made by some of the nurses later in life⁷⁵. Whether the above stories are a sanitisation of the events, the refusal to admit the truth demonstrates the strength of the camaraderie of this close knit group, that they would create such a story to be retold and the specific details of the actual events held on to for a lifetime. In researching her book, *Heroic Australian Women* in (2004), Susanna De Vries interviewed the elderly Sylvia Muir, who was suffering from breast cancer:

Sylvia claimed that at a secret meeting held in the Japanese Officer's Club, four older nurses agreed to replace the younger ones and become comfort women to spare the rest of the group from being starved to death. The other nurses swore on the Bible that the names of 'the four' would never be revealed, to spare pain to them and to their relatives, and no one ever broke this promise⁷⁶.

Whether they agreed deliberately as a group to hide this story or whether the group collectively stopped their captors, it continues to emphasise the loyalty and allegiance the women expressed to each other. The recollections of the events state that the four older nurses did not intend to return to Australia to start a family and so put their names forward. This provides further evidence of the strength of the nurses' group identity and their care for one another. The historian Ian Shaw also references this group solidarity in the postscript to his book, explaining the rumour associated with the comfort women experience⁷⁷. He reiterates the story of a bible being produced and everyone swearing not to reveal the names of the four sisters who became comfort women and that they honoured that oath for the rest of their lives⁷⁸. Shaw based his information on an interview undertaken by a postgraduate student who was not named in his work, and the nurse interviewed also remained

⁷³ Kenny, *Captives*, 44

⁷⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 39

⁷⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 323. Angell, appendix to *A Woman's War*. De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 549

⁷⁶ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 549

⁷⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 52

⁷⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 324

unidentified. In the mid-1990s, the postgraduate student was interviewing one of the nurses who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. With only a short life-expectancy, the nurse told this different story of the Officers' Club and the comfort women experience⁷⁹.

The nurses who mentioned the story as older women still refused to name the nurses involved, even though they were then living in a society more understanding of the way humans can be treated and defiled as prisoners of war. When Barbara Angell interviewed Oram in 2003 she continued to debunk the assertion that some nurses served as prostitutes for the Japanese officers. Oram declared that, "Even so, I might add, people do not believe we escaped scot-free, even now"⁸⁰. Angell added that:

Constant pestering for additional information eventually led the nurses to close ranks and refuse to discuss it... If the nurses wanted to suppress it, the event could have been hidden under another veil of silence. It might easily have been erased from history. Wilma and Iole Harper were actually terrified at the time, and it was only in retrospect that amusing anecdotes came to dominate....⁸¹

Thus, despite its horrors, the pressure to become comfort women created a fortifying experience as it worked as a bonding mechanism for the group at the beginning of internment.

According to the nurses' recollection of events, they were able to alert the Red Cross authorities to the violation of their rights and the Officers' Club was subsequently shut down. Yet, the Red Cross was not able to help at any other point during their internment. The women finally received Red Cross parcels in 1944, only because their captors permitted it. There is mention of the Japanese destroying Red Cross parcels and scattering the contents, which included medicines, in front of the internees⁸². De Vries addressed this issue, stating that,

After the war the survivors put out a story that Japanese demands for sexual services ceased after Dutch prisoners reported the incident to the Dutch Red Cross official who protested on their behalf. This was clearly

⁷⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 323

⁸⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 91

⁸¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 92

⁸² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 144

not true because throughout the war the Japanese paid no attention to the Red Cross⁸³.

If the story of the Red Cross intervention is untrue it merely emphasises the group solidarity and indicates that the truth was worse than they made out, possibly unbearably so. This indicates that the story was created to sanitise the events and all of the nurses stood by it and reiterated it in their subsequent retelling of the comfort women experience.

Incarceration and life as Prisoners of War

The nurses were able to share with like-minded people the difficulties of their prisoner of war experience as they had lived together communally before captivity and were adaptable to the challenges faced⁸⁴. They were used to discussing the experiences of their days during the pre-war training and continued to do so in the camps, which strengthened the collegiality amongst the women. The standard of living demanded by the nurses, however, caused friction with civilian internees at the beginning of internment. Adhering to strict hygiene practices was a product of their nursing training and by ensuring cleanliness they knew they would establish an efficient and well-managed camp site. The friction was caused amongst the nationalities because of their different customs, personalities and traditions⁸⁵. While the nurses were content with each other's company after years of training, working and living together in hospitals they could not tolerate other less disciplined internees⁸⁶.

The nurses were housed separately and a number of the 13th AGH shared accommodation with civilians. Betty Jeffrey wrote of the difficulties they encountered living with this civilian group. "Life is not easy next door, there are some rather odd types living with our girls, and they are hard to get on with, especially at ration time"⁸⁷. Jean Ashton recorded one of the arguments in her diary:

Final blitz – Mrs Close and...Raymont have a fight in the bathroom about 7am. We others all still in bed. We rush out to help – Miss McMurray

⁸³ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 549

⁸⁴ Twomey, *Australia's forgotten prisoners*, 59

⁸⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 54

⁸⁶ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 136

⁸⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 69. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, page 131. See also Angell, *A Woman's War*, 96

from the back room joins in fray by standing behind Mrs Close and hitting Sr Gladys Hughes on [the] head with a piece of wood⁸⁸.

Vivian Bullwinkel recorded another altercation in which Blanche Hempstead told one of the civilians that she needed to "...belt up or there would be a bloody big blue"⁸⁹. Bullwinkel emphasised the group comradeship when she described Nesta James coming to the defence of Hempstead when they were questioned by their captors over the incident. James told the Japanese guard that the Australian women would not be bullied by other internees⁹⁰.

Bullwinkel's retelling is an emotional understanding of the camaraderie written long after the events have taken place. Jeffrey's and Ashton's diary entries, which did go through some editing before publication, give accounts of how the authors felt at the time and are more matter of fact in their expression.

The nurses held a meeting and decided it was best for the group to surrender this house to the civilians and move all the nurses into already overcrowded accommodation. "So the sisters have moved out," Betty Jeffrey reported. "Ten of them are here, the other five sleep elsewhere.... The outcome of the whole distressing series of incidents was that, for the first time since internment, the two groups of nurses became one"⁹¹. They had not lived together previously, on the assumption that there was not enough room to accommodate 32 people in a three-bedroom house. This series of events confirmed otherwise⁹². These isolated incidents did not stop the women from making friends or sharing interests with those outside their nursing groups⁹³. In fact, the different nationalities were encouraged to interact by the committees set up internally to run the camp⁹⁴. The internees soon learned to tolerate each other's customs and traditions and became a well-organised camp⁹⁵.

During imprisonment there continued a camaraderie between the Australian men and women. It was first evidenced during their work in the hospital before Singapore capitulated and was reinforced when the nurses refused to desert their patients in Singapore. This kinship continued during internment. The

⁸⁸ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 37

⁸⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 131

⁹⁰ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 137

⁹¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 118

⁹² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 65

⁹³ Kenny, *Captives*, 80

⁹⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 249

⁹⁵ Simons, *While History passed*, 41

friendship between the men and the women provided a source of communication as sick men were treated in the same hospital and were able to pass notes⁹⁶. Betty Jeffrey stated, “The only chance we had of contact with our Australian men was through this hospital... When you saw an Australian making for the lavatory you would follow and say ‘What’s the news?’ They had radios and we didn’t...”⁹⁷ The men’s camp was later given permission to send chopped wood to the women’s camp, this becoming another source of information as the men hid notes in the wood or scrawled messages onto it⁹⁸. The celebration of Christmas also provided interaction with the men’s camp as they were allowed to exchange gifts and the Australian nurses “...put together a mah-jong set and a stuffed kangaroo, made from a shirt, for the Australian servicemen”⁹⁹. When the nurses received a parcel they would go together to the barbed wire to yell thank you to the men¹⁰⁰.

While there had been some divisive elements at the beginning of internment, this changed as the health of the camp deteriorated¹⁰¹. Mickey Syer stated that, “Oh we had squabbles, but we had fewer squabbles as time went on. We were down to the very basic form of life, there was less to quarrel about and we were tired. It didn’t mean we didn’t discuss things and argue but we did it with less irritation”¹⁰². The camaraderie and group loyalty of the Australian nurses was vital in assisting with their survival as they found support from their inclusion in this group.

A number of the sources described the importance of friendship to their continued survival and how the bonds they forged and group identity they had helped to maintain morale over a long period of time¹⁰³. The group solidarity was further strengthened as the women’s health began to deteriorate and the fight for survival against sickness and starvation became relentless¹⁰⁴. In July 1943 Jean Ashton wrote that it was, “Amazing that we have remained together and happy until now”¹⁰⁵. Wilma Oram, when interviewed after the war had

⁹⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 58

⁹⁷ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 103

⁹⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 60

⁹⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 61

¹⁰⁰ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 24

¹⁰¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 88

¹⁰² Kenny, *Captives*, 89

¹⁰³ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 552. See also Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 253

¹⁰⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 86

¹⁰⁵ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 46

ended, said that during their time in captivity the nurses had developed a strong resilience:

We stuck together and relied on each other as a group but did not ... take anything or anyone for granted.... In the camp we all supported each other and did our best to look after the sick and injured. We have a close and lasting friendship with each other and give support when needed¹⁰⁶.

While the memoirs illustrate a mutually supportive group of women there are a few disparaging quotes included about the experience. Jessie Simons said that, "We were like sisters of a family. Of course we did not always see eye to eye, but what sisters do?"¹⁰⁷ In her own memoirs she wrote, "I have many times heard people vowing they never wanted to set eyes on a certain person again, but when trouble came, they were usually the first to rally around"¹⁰⁸. The Australian sisters, therefore, maintained their mutual support and despite differences of opinion and frustration at their lives in internment, they remained a cohesive group¹⁰⁹. There is a contrast between the civilian internees' and the nurses' accounts. As evidenced in the autobiography *Three came home*, written by Agnes Keith, whose account of internment outlined the difficulty civilian women had with living communally. "How we women hated each other...Enmities were deeper than ever again. We had no experience of community living, we all knew about each other, and we still had energy with which to hate"¹¹⁰.

The camaraderie of the nurses was not confined to the internment camp. When they received news that the nurses of the *Empire Star* had returned to Australia safely they were elated¹¹¹. They decided to celebrate their colleagues' escape by enjoying a meal of any food they could find¹¹². Through letters they discovered that the OBE and George Medal were awarded to two of the sisters on board this ship and they were proud of their efforts, even a little envious:

... the *Empire Star*.... had arrived safely in Australia with refugees, including a contingent of nurses. These were the girls who had been

¹⁰⁶ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 32

¹⁰⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 88

¹⁰⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 91

¹⁰⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 88

¹¹⁰ Keith, *Three came home*, 56

¹¹¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 33

¹¹² Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 122

rushed off in the first evacuation contingent after we had all volunteered to stay. I had the nerve to load one of them down with my gramophone and records which therefore arrived safely in Australia long before I did¹¹³.

During 1943, a group of nurses discussed the idea of commemorating the women who had died. This conversation would eventually lead to the creation of the Nurses' Memorial centre in Melbourne, constructed after the war. Jeffrey, Bullwinkel, Ashton and Woodbridge promised each other if they returned home they would do something to honour the nurses who had died. They didn't want a shrine; they wanted something that would live because their friends had not¹¹⁴.

Their bonds of friendship were strengthened in adversity¹¹⁵. The women struggled with being separated from each other, especially during camp moves and complained if they were split into different travelling groups¹¹⁶. Wilma Oram, knowing there was an impending camp move, refused to go to the hospital for an X-ray because she did not want to be separated from the group. It was only Vivian Bullwinkel's promise that they would not leave her behind that she resolved to go¹¹⁷. The camp move to Muntok in January 1945 was particularly harrowing for all of the internees. It "... was a dreadful month.... we were separated on arriving at Muntok and some of our nurses sailed on the second ship. We hated being separated, because although we didn't always agree, we were always very supportive of each other"¹¹⁸.

This support had practical as well as emotional expression. When Vivian Bullwinkel reunited with the AANS after the massacre on Radji Beach the group agreed she could not be nursed in the hospital as their captors might discover her bullet wound¹¹⁹. Oram knew Bullwinkel before the War and after learning of her experience was determined to look after her¹²⁰. She moved Bullwinkel next to her in the sleeping quarters and shared her mosquito net and food,

¹¹³ Simons, *While history passed*, 39

¹¹⁴ Williams, *Victoria's Living Memorial*, 4

¹¹⁵ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 133 and 154

¹¹⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 146

¹¹⁸ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 72

¹¹⁹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 78

¹²⁰ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 233

slowly nursing her back to health¹²¹. They were so protective of Bullwinkel that they tried not to leave her alone in case she was questioned by the Japanese and the truth of the massacre uncovered¹²².

When Iole Harper was in hospital Betty Jeffrey washed her meagre collection of clothes¹²³. Pat Gunther looked after Pat Blake when she was ill and, despite the extra workload that created, Gunther was thankful for her company as they discussed theatre, friends and books¹²⁴. When two of the youngest nurses, Wilma Oram and Wilhelmina Raymont, were rostered on night shift together they would arrive at the hospital arm in arm and singing¹²⁵. It was the mutual support of the nurses even in the most trying of situations that helped to boost morale. During the final year of internment Pat Gunther recollects a poignant moment when she was very ill:

One day, I ventured by myself, to our cookhouse. This meant traversing about six metres without anything to hold on to. On my way back, a line of living cadavers, sitting on a stool, clapped and smiled at me. I'm ashamed to say I was concentrating so hard, I couldn't acknowledge them. I was very touched¹²⁶.

The longer the women were incarcerated the more interdependent they became. This was evident in their dedication to one another. When Jessie Blanch suffered a heart attack from overwork it was Winnie May Davis who took care of her in hospital and nursed her back to health¹²⁷. Wilma Oram explained a time when Vivian Bullwinkel assisted her during an illness after she had collapsed and soiled herself. Vivian collected a tin can:

She had to go and bail water out of this well, in the rain and mud, to clean me up – which she did willingly. You see, you did need a friend when these things happened, because they would happen without warning¹²⁸.

¹²¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 79

¹²² Angell, *A Woman's War*, 103

¹²³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 78

¹²⁴ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 83

¹²⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 172

¹²⁶ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 71

¹²⁷ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 6

¹²⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 132

As their health deteriorated the nurses developed strategies to help each other. Vivian and Wilma devised a food intake system during illness. They agreed that one would have double rations and then once the sick one had recovered they would reduce their own rations and increase the other's until they had exactly balanced their intake. If there was meat or vegetables in a meal they would record what was eaten and what one owed to the other, this action helped to keep them both alive¹²⁹. Food was always the overriding issue for the internees and became a constant conversation topic among them. During one hospital visit Betty Jeffrey lay next to Pat Blake and they discussed recipes and made promises on when they would visit each other after the war had finished¹³⁰.

The Australian nurses on duty in the hospital would heat up the food for the other AANS members and wouldn't charge them for it, saying they were in the family¹³¹. The nurses would chastise themselves when they were sick and unable to help their colleagues. Betty Jeffrey's camaraderie with her friends was so strong she felt she was letting the group down when she became ill. "These girls are tops, they chat away to each other about something quite pleasant, never a grumble. They even work double time so the pay won't be lost if one of them goes down with fever. Wish I could help them, I am back in bed again...."¹³². Jessie Simons' reliance on Mavis Hannah was such that she struggled when Hannah was hospitalised and felt the full hopelessness of their position without her¹³³.

Several of the sources commented that there were times when things were so bad that the prisoners envied those who had died during the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, even those murdered on Radji Beach. Pat Gunther stated that "They had not known the misery and wretchedness of life in a Japanese internment camp, it was over so quickly for them"¹³⁴. Jessie Simons expressed a similar sentiment as the nurses began to lose their battle for survival.

And so we buried our friends and companions and as we watched them die, and others grow weaker through dysentery, malaria and beri beri

¹²⁹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 174

¹³⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 150

¹³¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 150

¹³² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 148

¹³³ Simons, *While history passed*, 106

¹³⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 278

and malnutrition, we said, 'Those girls on the beach were lucky. I wonder what the plan is for the rest of us'. This was indeed a very grim and heartbreaking time¹³⁵.

Despite this adversity the bonds of friendship were strengthened. As McCullagh has expressed it: "They were desperate to survive, but to survive together..."¹³⁶

Rumour and information

The information vacuum created by the captors encouraged rumour in the camp. The use of rumour became a source of camaraderie between the women as the stories were often told in a light-hearted way to pass the time¹³⁷. Rumours, stories and innuendo were passed around the camp depending on how much credibility the individual gave to the story¹³⁸. Telling these stories became a way that internees could take their minds off the monotony of their everyday life and struggle for existence¹³⁹. While very few of the rumours were true, the nurses were interested in and entertained by them¹⁴⁰. "Rumours – we all take them the same way – listen with much interest and pass it on, but nobody really believes it if it is too fantastic"¹⁴¹. Betty Jeffrey also wrote that, "There had *never* been a better place for gossip than this spot where hundreds of women are crowded in together!"¹⁴² The camp thrived on rumour and often the stories revolved around a potential release date and for the nurses their repatriation to Australia¹⁴³. Rumours pertaining to the war were met with scepticism as the information was considered exaggerated¹⁴⁴. When the Australian sisters were told by the Japanese that submarines were in Sydney Harbour and they had hit the third pylon, there was much doubt about this rumour as there wasn't a third pylon on Sydney Harbour¹⁴⁵. Jessie Simons mentioned that, "In our circumstances, it was inevitable that rumours favourable to Allied victory should gain currency

¹³⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 91

¹³⁶ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

¹³⁷ Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 30

¹³⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 249

¹³⁹ Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 33

¹⁴⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 37

¹⁴¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 60

¹⁴² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 82

¹⁴³ Kenny, *Captives*, 59. See also Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 59

¹⁴⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 60

¹⁴⁵ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 6

with remarkable speed and frequency. Java ‘fell’ so often that each new report evoked the stock retort ‘who’s got it now?’”¹⁴⁶

The term ‘furphy’ is evident in the stories of Australian soldiers during World War I. According to Graham Seal, “Rumours or furchies were often *the* topic of conversation within the oral culture of the digger, of his prose, of his trench newspapers and even of his versifying”¹⁴⁷. This form of storytelling was considered an important way of communicating information between the diggers¹⁴⁸. The use of the word is also in a number of the nurses’ memoirs. “We never heard any other word about what the war was doing outside. We did hear a few furchies but we could never believe them”¹⁴⁹. Rumour became part of the entertainment:

Occasionally when we were more bored than usual, someone would start a rumour, mainly for the fun of hearing it back next day, often unrecognisable, but more glamorous or gruesome, depending on the type of story. ‘Any news?’ became a favourite salutation. ‘Another furchey’ was the frequent reply¹⁵⁰.

The captors were vigilant about keeping their prisoners separated from information about happenings in the outside world, the war and Australia. In the face of this, camaraderie assumed an even greater importance. Separated from their families and the outside world the group turned to each other for support.

Deaths of the nurses

The long-term deterioration of their health meant that of some of the internees died in captivity. This necessitated the writing of wills to ensure their belongings were given to friends rather than being surrendered to their captors who would then sell the items back to the internees¹⁵¹. If a will was written the Japanese were scrupulous in recognising its legality. Jessie Simons’ will, typically written on the back of an envelope and countersigned by two other nurses, stated, “in the event of my dying in captivity, I leave all my camp

¹⁴⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 61

¹⁴⁷ Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 28

¹⁴⁸ Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 28

¹⁴⁹ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 6

¹⁵⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 81

¹⁵¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 89

equipment, mattress and clothing and money to Sister M Hannah”¹⁵². During 1945 the number of deaths increased as medical efforts became almost completely ineffectual with little medicine available to curb the contagious illnesses. The women who died had to be left outside for up to 24 hours until coffins could be made. Their bodies would be guarded by other internees to ensure they were not attacked by vermin¹⁵³.

The first AANS death in prison was that of Wilhelmina Raymont, who died in February 1945. The accounts in the memoirs are evidence of the strong camaraderie amongst the women. In late 1944 Wilhelmina Raymont and Valerie Smith were both sentenced to stand in the heat of the day without hats or water as punishment for a misdemeanour¹⁵⁴. Nesta James wrote that:

On one occasion a guard walked into the barracks where the Sisters were living and saw a hole in the wall behind two Sisters. The holes had been there before we even entered the camp. He accused them of making these holes and took them to the guardhouse, kept them standing there questioning them for a very long time, then brought them back into the camp and made them stand in the sun¹⁵⁵.

The nurses attempted to alert the Japanese to Raymont’s heart condition, but they refused to listen and she collapsed and was taken to hospital¹⁵⁶. Val Smith, who was forced to remain in the heat for the rest of the day, was carried comatose by the nurses into the barracks at sunset and was treated for sunstroke¹⁵⁷. Bullwinkel and Oram spent time caring for Raymont during their rostered hours and Smith remained at her close friend’s bedside as often as she could¹⁵⁸. Both nurses survived this incident, but Raymont spent time in and out of hospital and eventually died¹⁵⁹. When Raymont died, Smith was not in hospital with her and felt she had deserted her friend when she needed her most. She repeated often that she should have been with Raymont and none of the nurses’ assurances relieved her guilt¹⁶⁰.

¹⁵² Simons, *While history passed*, 104

¹⁵³ Kenny, *Captives*, 72

¹⁵⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 82

¹⁵⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 146

¹⁵⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 159

¹⁵⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 154

¹⁵⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 158

¹⁵⁹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 159

¹⁶⁰ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 73

Each account of the death of one of their colleagues reinforced the camaraderie amongst those who remained alive. The nurses' accounts explain in detail how each of the women contributed to the wellbeing of the group, and describe the magnitude of each death on the Australians. On 20 February 1945, Rene Singleton died from beri beri, a condition that is curable with a balanced intake of vitamin B¹⁶¹. Jeffrey's diary stated, "We are all terribly sad; everyone liked Rene so much, she was always the life of the party at our worst moments"¹⁶². Recollections of Rene discuss how her humour and wit contributed to the upkeep of morale¹⁶³. Jessie Simons explained that she would "...always be remembered for her dry humour. Emaciated, almost beyond recognition save for her deep blue eyes. Poor Rene was always hungry – on the day she died she kept asking for 'more breakfast please'"¹⁶⁴.

The cough Blanche Hempstead pretended was tuberculosis at the beginning of internment probably indicated she had cancer and she was the next to die¹⁶⁵. Through her larrikinism, Hempstead always brought laughter to their difficult existence¹⁶⁶. She was known for her hard work, which undoubtedly hastened her death. When she realised that death was inevitable, she apologised to her friends for taking so long to die¹⁶⁷. Hempstead's apology is reiterated in a number of the nurses' stories. "In the end she must have known she would not get well, because she apologised to one of her friends who was sitting there with her for taking so long to die. She died half an hour later"¹⁶⁸.

Shirley Gardam died from dysentery on 4 April 1945, one of the few remaining sisters of the 2/4th CCS¹⁶⁹. The recollections of Gardam's funeral include a tribute to her love of flowers¹⁷⁰. This death caused Mavis Hannah, the last member of the 2/4th CCS, to reflect on her own survival:

By September 1945 I remained the sole surviving sister of my unit.... four were shot, two drowned and two [Gardam and Raymont] died in camp

¹⁶¹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 159

¹⁶² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 151

¹⁶³ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 159

¹⁶⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 89

¹⁶⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 268

¹⁶⁶ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 159

¹⁶⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 89

¹⁶⁸ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 151. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 160. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 89

¹⁶⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 89

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies* 154. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 161

in 1945. One of these died a raving lunatic from cerebral malaria. I had begged the Commandant to give me anti-malarial medication, which they had withheld from the Red Cross parcels; I was told there was plenty of room in the cemetery. He laughed, smacked my face and his guard hit me with his rifle. I bear the marks to this day¹⁷¹.

The comment 'plenty of room in the cemetery' is repeated in a number of the memoirs, with Jessie Simons dryly commenting that, "As the months went on even that became over crowded"¹⁷².

It would take twenty women to carry the coffins and while the funerals were carried out the internees would stand with their heads bowed¹⁷³. As the group became weaker its members were unable to continue to give "the same military honours that we had given to our first girl that died"¹⁷⁴. Gladys Hughes died on 31 May 1945. She was popular amongst the group for her contribution to new cooking ideas¹⁷⁵. Her colleagues believed that Hughes died because she gave up hope of ever being released¹⁷⁶. On 19 July 1945 Winnie May Davis, one of the youngest of the group, who had been protected and loved by the other Australian nurses, died¹⁷⁷. Pat Gunther tried desperately to improve Davis' diet by scrounging potatoes and eggs in an attempt to keep her alive¹⁷⁸. She discussed the death of her friend. "... Win had died.... I was very upset.... I spent all the next day resting and sewing together my mattress and Win's. It had been a gruesome joke between us that which one of us lived the longer, would have a decent mattress at last"¹⁷⁹. The women would sell all they had, even their own food, to hasten the recovery of a sick friend¹⁸⁰. Dorothy Freeman, who died on the 8 August 1945, was remembered as being Rene Singleton's best friend¹⁸¹. Jessie Simons explained that she "was a sweet girl, with whom internment went very hard"¹⁸². She died suddenly one night after

¹⁷¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 95

¹⁷² Simons, *While history passed*, 75. See also Kenny, *Captives*, 93

¹⁷³ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 78. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 7

¹⁷⁴ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 160

¹⁷⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 89

¹⁷⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 276

¹⁷⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 276

¹⁷⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 166

¹⁷⁹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 81

¹⁸⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 106

¹⁸¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 278

¹⁸² Simons, *While history passed*, 91

she and Flo Trotter had been chatting over a cup of tea¹⁸³. On 18 August 1945 one of the best loved of the Australian nurses, Pearl Mittelheuser, died¹⁸⁴. Three days before Mittelheuser's death, and unknown to the internees, the War in the Pacific had officially ended¹⁸⁵.

End of Imprisonment

After the announcement of the end of the war the prisoners from the men's camp were released and allowed into the women's camp¹⁸⁶. This occurrence further bonded the group of nurses who did not have their own family to meet up with as the camps joined¹⁸⁷. During the final hours of internment the thoughts of the group turned to the companions they had to leave behind in graves, and many of the nurses struggled with their feelings about returning home, taking time to be alone with their thoughts on what homecoming meant¹⁸⁸. The nurses were determined to leave internment together and collected the sick nurses from the hospital before leaving camp¹⁸⁹. Betty Jeffrey added whimsy to the situation, "It cut me to the quick to leave behind a cotton frock I had been making with the help of Jean Ashton. It was almost finished and ready to wear. The hours I spent with a rusty needle and drawn threads for cotton, trying to put it together!"¹⁹⁰ The important reason for preserving their uniforms was about to be realised as they had been waiting for the elusive day when they could go home¹⁹¹.

After the Australian nurses were transferred to Singapore Hospital the camaraderie of the wider group is evidenced through the interactions with the nurses they had worked with before Singapore was evacuated and the male Australian prisoners of war. The 2/14th AGH was formed to return to Singapore to rehabilitate the POWs¹⁹². Phyllis Pugh, a former colleague of the 2/13th AGH, asked to be transferred to Singapore Hospital to help the sisters recuperate¹⁹³. And from this group the first familiar face the *Vyner* Brooke nurses met was

¹⁸³ Simons, *While history passed*, 89. See also Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 178

¹⁸⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 278

¹⁸⁵ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 149

¹⁸⁶ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 91

¹⁸⁷ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 555

¹⁸⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 280

¹⁸⁹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 188

¹⁹⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 196

¹⁹¹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 556

¹⁹² Arthurson, *13th Australian General Hospital*, 123

¹⁹³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 293

Sister Trixie Glover who had been evacuated on the *Empire Star*¹⁹⁴. This interaction gave an indication of the psychological toll internment had on the Australian nurses:

Our welcome at this hospital was wonderful. We were very soon surrounded by the familiar faces of nurses we knew so well, but not one of us could remember their names! They were friends we had known for years, but for the life of us we could not think what to call them¹⁹⁵.

Most of the nurses shared mutual friends and were able to swap stories about earlier and happier times before incarceration¹⁹⁶. With the help of the Red Cross, the 2/14th AGH decorated the rooms of the formerly imprisoned women and supplied them with items they had lived without during their internment¹⁹⁷.

A connection to home was established by being hospitalised with Australian male prisoners of war¹⁹⁸. They were soldiers from the 8th Division, who had been imprisoned in Changi¹⁹⁹. The soldiers and nurses spent time exchanging stories about their internment; these conversations confirmed for the nurses that the Japanese had treated all prisoners alike²⁰⁰. Pat Gunther wrote that the men were “flying high”, as were the nurses, despite the atrocities they had endured during the making of the Burma Thailand railway²⁰¹. The men were

Reduced to virtual skeletons [but] they were on the road to recovery and would soon be on their way to Australia. They had come to pay their respects to the women who had tended them.... and many blinked away tears when they saw the condition the Sisters were in²⁰².

While the nurses enjoyed the interactions with nursing friends and the Australian men they still functioned as one tight group. They preferred to stay

¹⁹⁴ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 179

¹⁹⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 200. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 8

¹⁹⁶ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 288

¹⁹⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 151

¹⁹⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 122

¹⁹⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 151. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 181

²⁰⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 201

²⁰¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 95

²⁰² Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 180

together as they rehabilitated and prepared for re-entry into the world from which they had been excluded for more than three years²⁰³.

While the nurses had longed to return to Australia, the reality of it was met with trepidation as they were unsure how they would return to their lives at home. Their release bonded the close-knit group even further; some of the women talked about staying together as they were frightened of how the world had changed²⁰⁴. They had relied so heavily on each other and were now concerned about being separated²⁰⁵. Betty Jeffrey described the moment the group neared Fremantle on their journey home, "... the deck rails were lined with hundreds of soldiers and twenty-four nurses. We were terribly excited at first, but as it got nearer, silence reigned. For an hour we watched Fremantle getting closer, and still there was silence everywhere"²⁰⁶.

One of the hardest tasks was facing the families of the women who had died, as it caused a sense of guilt for having survived when so many had not²⁰⁷. It was due to the respect and loyalty that the nurses had for each other that they still made it a point to visit the parents of their dead colleagues²⁰⁸. A reception was held in Fremantle and Mavis Hannah, as the only surviving nurse from the 2/4th CCS, spent time speaking with the families²⁰⁹. "Some of the mothers of the girls we had left in Sumatra came to hear those little odds and ends of news that are so precious...Mavis...spent a lot of time with these mothers and we all felt it"²¹⁰. Florence Trotter stated that, "Our family was slowly breaking up and we knew we would miss each other very much"²¹¹. After surviving the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* together and forming a strong bond of friendship during internment, Betty Jeffrey found it particularly difficult to leave Iole Harper, as it would be the first time they were separated since being taken prisoner²¹².

²⁰³ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 290

²⁰⁴ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 178

²⁰⁵ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 197

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 203

²⁰⁷ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 199

²⁰⁸ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 558

²⁰⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 297

²¹⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 124

²¹¹ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 9

²¹² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 203

The difficulty the nurses had in re-adjusting to civilian life without each other is further evidence of the depth of their camaraderie. This is repeated in many of the nurses' stories of their after war experience. They found it disconcerting to be on their own and struggled to communicate with anyone outside their group about their prisoner of war experience²¹³. Mavis Hannah stated that, "We missed our companions who had sustained us for so long and understood how we felt. Our people nearly killed us with kindness and couldn't see through our eyes at all"²¹⁴. Jenny Greer described the loneliness of their return, despite the wonderful welcome home, and that the nurses who lived in the same city would try to meet for lunch or drinks after duty until they were used to being civilians again²¹⁵.

Vivian Bullwinkel found the individual attention she received as the only survivor of the Radji Beach Massacre difficult in the face of all that the nurses had endured²¹⁶.

How could the press overlook the courage and compassion shown by the Sisters of the 2/4th, 2/10th and 2/13th as they tended the wounded in and around St Patrick's while under fire. What of the discipline shown as they stood on the sloping deck of the sinking *Vyner Brooke* waiting for civilians to leave? Of starving sisters sharing their rations with hospital patients, of the stubborn and resolute attitude they adopted when they were faced with forced prostitution or death [?] They cleaned sewer pits with half coconut shells for the betterment of others; they nursed the sick although racked with chills of malaria themselves. They apologised to friends for taking too long to die and they dug the graves and buried the dead. Then above all there was their unflinching loyalty to Australia, the service and each other²¹⁷.

Wilma Oram, Vivian Bullwinkel and Beryl Woodbridge worked at Heidelberg Hospital where Betty Jeffrey continued to recuperate from illnesses she contracted during internment. The women would sit together on the veranda playing bridge with a pack of cards they had made in camp from a photograph

²¹³ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 563

²¹⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 156

²¹⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 157

²¹⁶ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 563

²¹⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 186

album²¹⁸. When Jeffrey's health had improved she travelled through rural Victoria with Bullwinkel raising money for the Nurses Memorial Centre²¹⁹. They gave talks and held fundraisers, collecting more than 78,000 pounds towards their cause²²⁰.

The conclusion of the war did not signify the end of the friendships and while many of the nurses' lives changed through career, marriage and having children, their bond of camaraderie was not broken²²¹. They remained in contact and organised group reunions²²². Florence Trotter acknowledged that:

Those of [us] who survived that camp together have remained a close knit group. The friendship we share is very important to us all. After all these years we still keep in regular contact. This enduring friendship has been the most precious thing to emerge from those dreadful years in prison camp²²³.

The connection started during pre-war training and was strengthened on the boat to Singapore. Their allegiance to each other and their camaraderie was developed during 1941 and reinforced when war came to Singapore. It was evidenced during the evacuation from the *Vyner Brooke* and the massacre on Radji Beach. Camaraderie was strengthened throughout internment by their group solidarity in the face of enforced prostitution and their reliance on each other during sickness and death. Through their experience they understood the value of comradeship and gained in patience, understanding and tolerance²²⁴. Florence Trotter stated:

That's why we came home, because we helped each other in the camp...We kept each other going, and if one wasn't able to go out on a working party, as long as they had the numbers, they didn't care who went, so someone else would go...²²⁵

²¹⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 200. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4

²¹⁹ Williams, *Victoria's Living Memorial*, xi

²²⁰ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 565

²²¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 158

²²² De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 568

²²³ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 9

²²⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 162

²²⁵ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 11

The kinship was developed by the harshness of the environment of internment and the struggle they faced daily.

CHAPTER 7

Resourcefulness

“This story ... should be read and remembered not only for the fine examples of courage and bravery of which it tells, but also for the grand humour, resourcefulness and ability to overcome the greatest problems and withal, to keep morale at the highest imaginable level”¹.

Throughout their internment the nurses devised strategies to make their existence bearable. Many of the tactics they used focussed upon duplicating, as closely as possible, their routines, activities and entertainment in their lives before captivity. These activities allowed the expression of sardonic humour, larrikinism and anti-authoritarianism that has become part of the Australian service personnel ethos, but has been rarely attributed to the nurses. These activities, some of which were permitted by the Japanese captors, contributed strongly to their endurance. They participated in music nights, lectures and skit nights. The resourcefulness of the women and their inventive ways to survive internment were recorded in their memoirs. In the latter years, these activities declined or ceased for two reasons, either the Japanese guards banned them or the internees were too ill to maintain them. They attempted to continue these activities, despite the ban, until they were too weak and dispirited to continue.

Music, choral nights and entertainment

Boredom was one of the greatest enemies the women faced during internment². Although they kept busy doing camp chores and nursing they had little to do in their free time. To combat inactivity, an entertainment committee was created which performed choral and skit nights. These nights became an important form of escapism. Jessie Blanch recalled, “We’d sit out at night and the girls would talk about the different experiences they’d had. And that was when you had the concerts and the choirs. Something to take you away from where you were”³. These events were important in raising the internees’ morale, giving them a different focus in their otherwise monotonous

¹ Williams, *Victoria’s Living Memorial*, xv

² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 256

³ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 4

lives. Even those who could not sing were included, as Wilma Oram discovered. She recalled that, “community singing....was very amateur, we were just a group of people who couldn’t sing very well, but we used to belt out ‘*Teddy Bear’s Picnic*’ and things like that. Things we could remember”⁴.

A number of the Australian nurses joined the entertainment committee, which was started by other internees. Their theatrical performances would reflect their lives in internment and include performances about the Japanese captors, portraying them as sarcastic and cruel. They were delivered in a boisterous and enthusiastic Australian style⁵. A skit performed by Wilma Oram, Sylvia Muir and Veronica Clancy openly mocked the Japanese captors and was entitled ‘*The Light of Love*’, which Oram described in her autobiography as “screamingly funny”⁶. As their captors understood little English, the nurses, in this covert way, demonstrated the anti-authoritarian behaviour so often attributed to men of the Australian armed forces.

Jessie Blanch referred to one occasion when the nurses acted out a shadow show. She recalled:

I was the doctor. It was an operation.... We had to get a sheet from somewhere and put a light behind it. I opened the patient up with an axe and pulled out all sorts of things. I remember I got another piece of rag and tied it like a sausage, and pulled that out. I’d had a birthday, my second in the camp, and Woodie had given me a lovely little doll. Well we pulled that out. And next thing, in comes the Jap. Because we were roaring laughing, and they were always saying, “Why you laugh? Why you laugh?” Because they didn’t think we should be laughing. But they were quite amused too about this shadow show⁷.

The shows were so popular they did multiple performances⁸. Jean Ashton was part of a group that performed a re-enactment of “*Waltzing Matilda*”, with Iole Harper as the jumbuk. The Japanese looked through the window of their

⁴ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 14

⁵ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 138

⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 105

⁷ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 4

⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 49

house, curious about the performance⁹. The nurses also became audiences for other groups who amused themselves playing charades¹⁰.

A choral society was created under the direction of one of the internees, Margaret Dryburgh, who was the head of a team of Scottish missionaries¹¹. This choir or vocal orchestra is referenced often in the memoirs of the nurses and featured in the movie *Paradise Road*, which was loosely based on the experiences of this group of internees. The choir is credited with renewing a sense of dignity in the inmates and improving the morale for all prisoners¹². Mickey Syer, Flo Trotter and Betty Jeffrey were three of the Australian nurses who joined the vocal orchestra¹³. Trotter stating that:

The orchestra was divided into four parts. We each copied our part on to any paper we could find and, on practice nights, we would meet in a little room behind the Dutch Kitchen. The music was absolutely wonderful. It was so good for the soul and lifted our spirits immeasurably¹⁴.

Pat Gunther specifically remembered the Christmas concert. "... [W]e loved the concert and the vocal orchestra. I think everyone that could, attended. The performer's efforts and Mrs Dryburgh's extra contribution with the small organ, made us aware that there was another world outside"¹⁵. The choral performances developed a link for all of the internees with the outside world because they forgot they were prisoners during the concerts¹⁶. The choir lasted for nearly a year, but even at the first performance a number of the women were too weak to stand¹⁷.

The use of music as entertainment was not restricted to this choral group; in one of their camp sites there was a piano¹⁸. "Like ants the nurses swarmed round the instrument and, with many a grunt, and a few damaged knees and

⁹ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 20

¹⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 48.

¹¹ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 110. See also, Kenny, *Captives*, 58. See also, Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 146

¹² Kenny, *Captives*, 73. See also De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 549. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6

¹³ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 41

¹⁴ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6

¹⁵ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 61

¹⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 87. See also, Kenny, *Captives*, 73. See also, Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 146

¹⁷ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 135

¹⁸ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 18

toes, we somehow got it installed in our ‘Nurses’ Home’¹⁹. The piano was used for Saturday night sing-a-longs and was slept on every night²⁰. Jessie Simons conceded that amongst the Australians there was more willingness than ability, though they soon expanded their group to include other talented internees²¹. Vivian Bullwinkel remarked that, “We all go to bed exhausted on Saturday nights, we have sung and laughed too much”²². For Wilma Oram, music became an essential part of renewing hope in the camp.

We missed music, missed it terribly.... We had these sing songs on a Saturday night because we were missing music so much. There was quite a lot of music.... We had people who could sing and they used to sing for us.... Music was essential. I think it’s something you miss more than anything else. As much as food you miss music, even if you’re not musical²³.

A number of the stories make particular mention of a song entitled “The Captives Hymn” that was written by Margaret Dryburgh during internment and was sung for the first time on 5 July 1942 (Appendix 6)²⁴. The internees sang it with real feeling at church services²⁵.

Playing cards was another communal activity that was used to pass the time in internment²⁶. The nurses made a pack of cards and the workmanship was detailed because time was plentiful²⁷. The internees would have bridge parties using these cards; one such party celebrated Betty Jeffrey’s birthday²⁸. The women learned Contract Bridge, which was played every afternoon²⁹. Jessie Simons wrote that, “The prize was usually a few chillies or bananas, and some eager souls had to be quelled in occasional arguments by the reminder that we are not playing for a sheep station”³⁰. The entertainment for the nurses did not

¹⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 48

²⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 44

²¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 48

²² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 45

²³ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 13

²⁴ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 47. See also, “Blanchie” interview transcript, page 8. See also, Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 248. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4.

²⁵ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 115

²⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 40. Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 104

²⁷ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 104

²⁸ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 17

²⁹ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 16

³⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 71

always revolve around group activities. Pat Gunther spent her free time sketching; a number of her drawings were exchanged for birthday and Christmas presents or sold for money³¹.

A library was established, using the books supplied by the internees who had been able to bring possessions into the camp³². Those who contributed to the library were then able to borrow from it³³. The joining fee of a book was later dropped and the entire camp was allowed to access the library, as books created a necessary diversion for the women³⁴. Jessie Simons humorously declared that she felt she had "...read enough detective novels to be able to spot a criminal on sight"³⁵. Reading became a way for the internees to escape their oppressive conditions. In the later years of internment when they received letters they sewed them together into a book from which they read, often aloud, together³⁶. Margaret Dryburgh, who created the vocal orchestra, also authored a magazine called the 'Camp Chronicle'³⁷. As paper was scarce the magazine had to be passed around among the women. It contained recipes with ambitious cooking tips on how to use their meagre possessions, announcements, gossip, stories and games³⁸.

The women revived a traditional connection between Australia and England by planning an Ashes cricket match, although the game didn't eventuate³⁹. Betty Jeffrey was deflated that the planned event did not come to fruition. "We decided to have a Test Match, England versus Australia, but somehow we never played that test. I'm sorry, for I'll never get another opportunity to play for Australia"⁴⁰. Another method of entertainment for the group was the organisation of lectures, lessons and talks. These were semi-formal occasions when one of the Australian nurses or a guest from the camp would address the Australian women⁴¹. To keep their brains active they decided to take lessons in

³¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 60

³² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 248. See also, Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 46. See also, Simons, *While history passed*, 53

³³ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 145. See also Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 39

³⁴ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 46

³⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 53

³⁶ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 144

³⁷ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 41. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 135

³⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 44

³⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 250

⁴⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 125

⁴¹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 250

French, taught by a civilian Mrs Glasgow, on Thursday afternoons at 4.30⁴². Sister Paulie, a Dutch nun, gave drawing lessons to all of the women⁴³.

Participation in the different activities provided relaxation despite the difficult circumstances they faced daily. Ultimately the guards banned many such activities, becoming suspicious of large groups of women gathering together⁴⁴. The Japanese did not want groups to congregate because they “...think you’re hatching up something”⁴⁵. Jean Ashton believed the reason was that the guards did not want the women to be joyful⁴⁶. As the health of the internees deteriorated, they were forced to stop many of these activities, for they no longer had the energy or time to contribute to camp entertainment⁴⁷. Their days were focused on completing camp chores, working for food and taking care of patients.

Christmas, New Years, Birthdays and anniversaries

The nurses’ need to connect with civilisation meant they celebrated many anniversaries or events they would have enjoyed outside internment. During the first years of their imprisonment, when the health of the entire camp was good and the nurses expected to be repatriated to Australia quickly, the events were celebrated with enthusiasm. As resources began to run out and the women were forced to re-gift presents they had already received, or wrote on the back of the cards they had already been given, the excitement with which these dates were celebrated decreased. Betty Jeffrey wrote that, “Iole gave me the Christmas card I made and gave to her two years ago. I gave her some flowers sitting in a tiny shell I found by the fence”⁴⁸.

Christmas was celebrated every year and initially the women were able to exchange presents and food with the male internees. The Christmas 1942 meal was recorded in the memoirs with much joy as it included meat and potatoes

⁴² Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 22

⁴³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 77

⁴⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 44

⁴⁵ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 14

⁴⁶ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 43

⁴⁷ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 151

⁴⁸ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 62

sent from the men's camp⁴⁹. The nurses would go to great lengths to imitate the Christmases they celebrated at home:

...Flo [Trotter] and Sister James and I were the cooks. We'd saved up a little bit of extra. We used to pound rice and make bread in a tin. We got up very early in the morning and made 'toast' out of this awful bread before they went to church...The men had sent in some meat and we were able to make a bit of a stew with a few vegetables and things, and we had to have a Christmas 'pudding' so we pounded the rice and made flour, then we had some brown beans which we cut up, and they looked like raisins. We had a little bit of coconut, so we milked those and with the milk we thickened it with rice and made a custard. It was beautiful, and such a lovely Christmas day. And we gave [sic] each other presents, well they were awful presents. A bit of this and a bit of that because we didn't have much⁵⁰.

The nurses believed they would be repatriated before the end of 1942 and were sure they would be home for Christmas⁵¹. When this didn't occur they decided to make the best of the situation by making toys as Christmas presents. Several of the nurses' memoirs feature a story about the women making a stuffed kangaroo, which became another connection to Australia. "To our minds, the gem of the toy collection was a kangaroo manufactured by one of our girls. He was sadly out of proportion but we excused this as one of the effects of the rice diet. He went to the men POWs as a Christmas present..."⁵². Nurses Greer and Oxley made and decorated a small Christmas tree to improve morale by showing that life wasn't always awful in the internment camp⁵³.

The Christmas of 1943 was celebrated with less enthusiasm than the previous year, but nevertheless, the internees still tried to make it special⁵⁴. The Christmas meal was the best most had eaten for the year as the women hoarded or traded delicacies in the weeks beforehand to share on this day. The

⁴⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 47. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4. The internees would sing Christmas Carols to the men as they passed by their camp and for Wilma Oram this became "...more proof that, no matter what savagery their captors inflicted on them, civilisation would prevail for the vast majority in the camps" (Angell, *A Woman's War*, 116)

⁵⁰ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 4

⁵¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 55

⁵² Simons, *While history passed*, 46

⁵³ Kenny, *Captives*, 61

⁵⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 69

nurses continued to sing Christmas Carols as they were determined to celebrate important events from their lives outside of internment⁵⁵. Jean Ashton's diary entry for their final Christmas in internment in 1944 described the degrading conditions: "Christmas diet low this year. Nursing in Hosp. very hard. Patients lying up on barli barli mattresses almost touching. Sanitary conditions in camp simply appalling. (15 deaths a month)"⁵⁶.

New Year was celebrated every year at one of the nurses' houses and they gathered with the hope they would return to Australia the following year, as they reflected on the difficult year they had just endured⁵⁷. Jessie Simons explained that they continued this celebration throughout internment, "Just to keep the season in full we 'saw the New Year in' with traditional ceremony and [would] state: 'Next Year we will do this at home' – a refrain repeated at the end of 1943, and more faintly with less hope a year later. Not till New Year of 1946 did the wish come true"⁵⁸.

Birthdays were another important event celebrated by the group. As, after a long period of captivity, they all knew the intimate details of each other's families, their birthdays would be celebrated as well⁵⁹. They attempted normality through these events, giving gifts that had little value beyond the feelings of respect and love they represented⁶⁰. The birthday celebrations helped to increase morale by acting as a diversion to their daily routines,

Little celebrations of birthdays...were an excuse for [*sic*] lighthearted levity...Birthdays were always remembered, and most of us had four in captivity...Little presents we would have scorned to give in other days were very precious...a small camp-made powder puff came my way in 1942 from Dorothy Freeman and Rene Singleton. Right then I had no powder to use it with, but I will always treasure the little thing, embroidered with a spray of blue flowers and my initial...⁶¹

⁵⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 248. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 69

⁵⁶ Ashton, *Jean's Diary*, 51

⁵⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 72. See also, Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 62

⁵⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 47

⁵⁹ Kenny, *Captives*, 60

⁶⁰ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 247

⁶¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 70

Oram's third birthday in captivity was specifically remembered as the nurses had a sudden delivery of mail on that day⁶². Not only was Oram having a party, but also all of the women were celebrating⁶³. The merriment was dulled slightly by the sad news contained in some of the letters. Beryl Woodbridge discovered that her mother had died and Nesta James that her father had died⁶⁴. The description of Oram's final birthday celebration in internment shows how much the health of the attendees had deteriorated. Veronica Clancy wrote, "All members of the AANS who could possibly stagger were present, many starting early so they could rest on the way. It was a very happy reunion, even those curled up on bali bali's, in the throes of fever, enjoyed it"⁶⁵.

Holding onto civilisation

The need for the women to hold onto their connection with civilisation is evident in their retelling of the events. Jess Doyle, the owner of the only functioning watch in the camp, would always answer when asked the time⁶⁶. Jeffery reflected, "We often wonder why we worry about time, but suppose it is just one of those survivals of a civilised life. We also keep a strict check on the date and day of the week, even if every day is the same"⁶⁷. Betty Jeffrey and Iole Harper built a small table for themselves, which they placed in the garden and bought a serviette from another internee "...so they could eat away from the crowd and feel 'quite civilised'⁶⁸. Jeffrey described a dinner party she was invited to by Iole where the nurses had gone to the trouble of recreating a "...dinner in a true party manner"⁶⁹. Sylvia Muir had created a floral arrangement and each guest had her own bowl and ate with a spoon made from tin. Shirley Gardham managed to eat her dinner with a long-handled mustard spoon while another ate with a shoe-horn.

⁶² Simon, *While history passed*, 71

⁶³ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 143

⁶⁴ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 144

⁶⁵ Veronica Clancy cited in Angell, *A Woman's War*, 178

⁶⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 68

⁶⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 68

⁶⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 76

⁶⁹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 40

The nurses decided to grow a small lawn around their house, which they used a knife blade to trim⁷⁰. They also attempted to cultivate small gardens close to their huts⁷¹.

It has made a big difference to have our own little garden of vegetables and balsam flowers growing so fast. Fortunately we kept some tomato and balsam seeds from our small garden in the last camp in case we were moved suddenly to another camp and would want to start a garden⁷².

When they had the energy they would tend their vegetable gardens, often with little to no harvest for all of their hard work⁷³. Gunther recalled that some of the tubers they grew were stolen. "As they matured, we were shocked to hear that some of the internees were stealing tubers at night. Then the Japanese harvested the crop. They kept the tubers and left us the vines. We wondered about the benefits of honesty"⁷⁴. They would also save seeds found in their rations and try to grow them in their gardens⁷⁵. Although the gardens were cultivated as a matter of necessity, lawn was grown to retain a bit of civilisation.

Fashion continued to be important to the women. Despite the lack of clothing and materials to make clothes, they were still concerned about the patterns and colours of fabric⁷⁶. Jessie Simons fastidiously attempted to keep clean a pair of white shorts she owned. "The white shorts caused no end of bother, and my constant care earned me the reputation of having a white clothes complex"⁷⁷. The women continued to dress for dinner; in doing so they maintained the habits of their civilised life⁷⁸. Having fashion shows was also a popular form of entertainment, with one showing the possible fashions of the women in 1945⁷⁹. "Lights flashed on for a split second to show three girls clad only in two paw paw leaves. And believe me, it very nearly came to that!"⁸⁰. Pat Gunther described how she bought a magazine to read and that "Pat Blake

⁷⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 99

⁷¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 101. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6

⁷² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 99

⁷³ Kenny, *Captives*, 92

⁷⁴ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 54

⁷⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 253

⁷⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 81

⁷⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 103

⁷⁸ Kenny, *Captives*, 66

⁷⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 251

⁸⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 50

was shocked that I would read such trash, so I read the most romantic lines to her”⁸¹. At the conclusion of the war, when the male POWs were free to enter the women’s camp, the nurses commented on their treatment by the men, “As I walked in all the men stood up. It quite startled me, it was unlike life in the camp to see civilised manners again”⁸².

Humour

Next war, we have all decided to set off at once for the South Pole with plenty of clothes and some sugar!⁸³

Humour became one of the most important strategies of survival and a coping mechanism for the internees⁸⁴. As shown earlier, it was used in every difficult scenario they faced, including the evacuation from Singapore and even while the women were standing awaiting death in Radji Beach. During the years of internment, the use of humour became particularly prevalent and their recollections reflect this⁸⁵. It is found in the prison camp diaries and in the memoirs written and recorded by the women later in life. Jessie Simons described her attempt to get to shore after the bombing of the *Vyner Brooke*, “... [I]n an exaggerated pantomime I pointed to the boat, to ourselves and to the shore, trying to convey by signs that we wanted to ‘thumb a ride’⁸⁶. With her continued used of humour she described the events when she finally reached the shore:

...[H]e held up his arms to assist us out. Weak and stumbling, I fell over the side and into his upstretched arms, too weak to avoid them and too tired to want to. It was much later that I was able to concoct the joke that I had fallen, not into the hands, but into the arms of the [Japanese]!⁸⁷

Having survived the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*, Betty Jeffrey recounted that the women later held a discussion about their prospects of swimming back to Australia⁸⁸. Jeffrey even employed humour to describe some of the darker

⁸¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 87

⁸² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 189

⁸³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 106

⁸⁴ Higonnet, *Behind the Lines*, 42

⁸⁵ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 125

⁸⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 20

⁸⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 21

⁸⁸ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 13

times in camp. “A few nights ago a [Japanese] guard fired a shot from his rifle at a shadow in the camp and managed to kill outright another [chap]. That’s the spirit boys! Makes one less for our chaps to polish off somewhere else”⁸⁹.

The deterioration of health was also treated with much mirth, especially Vivian Bullwinkel’s battle with tinea. At times it was so crippling she was hospitalised for it. Upon her discharge she was advised to rub butter or margarine into the most affected parts, “This struck us all as a good joke since we had not seen either since we slipped out of Singapore; if by any remote chance some did turn up we would have been too diet-conscious to use it as an ointment”⁹⁰. Vivian’s feet, which were clearly a conversation piece for the women, were also mentioned in Wilma Oram’s autobiography.

A fortune teller in the camp told her that she would not be able to walk into the ship that was to take us home, on account of her feet. Vivian’s feet became a barometer deciding the day of freedom and when they looked a bit worse we were almost pleased – surely the ship must be near now? With mixed feelings we watched them get better⁹¹.

As food became the overriding issue, there was also humour in their continued weight loss with, “No wonder we all have slim figures, rice diet and sleeping on tiles for two years is the most effective slimming process I know. When we get home none of us ever intends to be hungry again; we now see eye to eye with Scarlett O’Hara”⁹². The use of humour helped to raise morale, especially when dealing with the effects of reduced circumstances. Washing the dishes was now described as a joy because the job was completed very quickly as each person owned only one teaspoon and one bowl⁹³. Jean Ashton wrote in her diary, “[Japanese] tell us, ‘There is no rice left in Australia’ – Hooray sez we! We have had rice at every meal since we arrived 8 months ago”⁹⁴.

The internees coined nicknames for the guards. The Japanese insisted they were called by name, which ensured that the internees did not unless it was directly to their face⁹⁵. A guard who had an intense dislike for lipstick was

⁸⁹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 51

⁹⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 62

⁹¹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 104

⁹² Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 92

⁹³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 43

⁹⁴ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 27

⁹⁵ See also Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 5

called 'Lipstick Larry'⁹⁶. There was also a guard whom they named "Ask-wah-you-like-you-won't-get-it-Miachi" and another was 'Moonface'⁹⁷. Pat Gunther's recollections included the names 'Seki the Sadist' and 'Ah Fat'⁹⁸. For the nurses who had trained under a system that required absolute subservience to authority, this name calling only occurred when the Japanese could not hear them. It became a private joke amongst the internees pitting themselves against their captors and creating a communal feeling amongst the women. In the face of the continued hardship the nurses attempted to maintain their humour and with this, their dignity⁹⁹.

The internees also practised small acts of defiance when fetching water for their captors. Pat Gunther retold her own interaction:

...[W]e had to fill the tong in the house of the sergeant of guards. The accepted rule was to spit into the tong as one emptied the bucket. I could never quite do it, but I'm pleased to say there was always a certain amount of froth on top of the water when the tong was full¹⁰⁰.

Jessie Simons had no such scruples and her account had a slightly different version of her involvement:

The amount of water needed for the gardens was almost unlimited, and the [Japanese] added to our burden with their own requirements of cooking, cleaning and bathing water. We had a petty revenge, which was at the moment very satisfying, by spitting in the water carried for [Japanese] use, but we had no proof this ever did them any harm¹⁰¹.

Humour became an important and integral aspect to survival, especially towards the end of internment, when there remained little energy for anger, so the nurses would use humour to boost their flagging spirits¹⁰². Vivian Bullwinkel and Betty Jeffrey drew cards to decide who would get to eat an egg they had acquired:

⁹⁶ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 143

⁹⁷ Kenny, *Captives*, 54. See also Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 143

⁹⁸ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 56

⁹⁹ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 115

¹⁰⁰ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 54

¹⁰¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 75

¹⁰² Kenny, *Captives*, 67. See also Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 262

Vivian was at one end of the hut, I at the other, and while everybody involved kept fingers crossed, we drew cards. I drew first – the three of spades. My friends did glare at me! Viv then drew the three of diamonds! Of course we all roared with laughter and people came from all over the place to see what the noise was about. Only an egg¹⁰³.

Whenever it was possible the women tried to create laughter¹⁰⁴. Betty Jeffrey's humour is mentioned often throughout the memoirs. Jessie Blanch described their attempts to "...try to entertain ourselves. Jeff and I had a queer sense of humour.... We used to try to make things funny, to fill in time"¹⁰⁵. Pat Gunther explained that the positive aspects of their personalities shone through as the conditions worsened in the camps. "With the deterioration in health of the internees, and the worsening of the conditions and rations, it was interesting that kindness and gentleness increased. Humour, thank god, was still with us"¹⁰⁶.

The resourcefulness of the group was essential for their survival. The nurses' ability to create entertainment for themselves and use humour as a way of keeping in contact with the civilised world they had known prior to internment became pivotal aspects of their endurance. While these strategies were indicative of the group camaraderie, there were behaviours specific to assisting their individual health and well-being. This included their need to work for money to buy food and their resilience despite the deterioration of health and harassment by their captors. These individual strategies also assisted their survival.

Working for money

"The nurses were nothing if not enterprising"¹⁰⁷

The shipwrecked nurses were interned with few possessions and so, out of necessity, began money-making activities to buy food. These tasks were performed on top of their district nursing duties and camp chores. Other internees had been able to bring possessions, clothing and money into the

¹⁰³ The three of spades was equivalent to the three of diamonds and so, there was no winners for the egg. Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 173

¹⁰⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 67

¹⁰⁵ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 4

¹⁰⁶ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 88

¹⁰⁷ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 171

camp, which made their existence more bearable. Mavis Hannah commented with humour that, “As long distance breast stroke does not permit luggage-carrying, I now possess no worldly goods”¹⁰⁸.

No work was considered too menial for the Australian nurses if it meant providing food for the group¹⁰⁹. They earned an income doing manual chores or making goods for the prisoners who had money to pay for their services¹¹⁰. One of the enterprises they undertook was hat making¹¹¹. Other activities ranged from setting up bakeries, making new clothes, repairing sandals and shoes, washing clothes, and sewing hankies to chopping wood. They would babysit the children of the other internees and make toys for them¹¹². Their constant hunger, which resulted in a continual obsession with food, spurred them to develop ingenious ways to make money¹¹³. The women continued these money-making schemes until the conclusion of the war¹¹⁴.

Jessie Simons and Mavis Hannah developed a working partnership. They would cook for the other internees and hospital patients. To entice the sick to eat they would deliver their meals and private delicacies hot, finding that many attempted to eat the unappetizing food because it was freshly cooked¹¹⁵. Betty Jeffrey began trimming hair. “After practising on the girls here I’ve developed into the camp barber at ten cents a trim, people providing their own scissors, which are usually curved nail scissors!”¹¹⁶ The nurses would sew scraps of material together to make clothes to sell, though there was only one needle, which they had a roster to use¹¹⁷.

The nurses put their creative skills to work with Jessie Blanch and a friend making a mah-jong set, with the wood sourced from pulling down part of their house, which they were able to sell¹¹⁸. As mentioned previously, Pat Gunther’s artistic talent for drawing also gained her money, as she would sell her

¹⁰⁸ Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 145

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 263

¹¹⁰ Manners, Bullwinkel, 149. See also Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, 145

¹¹¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 53

¹¹² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 257

¹¹³ Wilma Oram interview transcript, page 40

¹¹⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 78

¹¹⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 87

¹¹⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 68

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 68

¹¹⁸ McCullagh, *Willingly into the Fray*, 115.

sketches (Appendix 5, figure 19, 21 and 22). “I usually put in for sale of a couple of drawings, for which I got forty cents each. An egg cost fifty cents on the black market. I called them my ‘almost an egg’ drawings”¹¹⁹. Ultimately, the few personal possessions they had needed to be sold. Iole Harper sold the shorts she slept in to buy food¹²⁰. Gunther dropped her watch and could not make it start ticking again so sold it on the black market and received 50 guilders for it¹²¹. Their situation became so desperate that towards the end of internment, Pat Blake was forced to sell her engagement ring¹²².

Using the black market for buying and trading goods became a necessity. While the nurses worked hard to earn an income, the inflation on the black market meant they could buy very little with the money they had. Ultimately the rising prices and insufficiency of goods left the women destitute¹²³.

From these sources we ought to have had sufficient income to make our diet both varied and nutritious...the black market supplies were never sufficient to supply everyone, and prices soared so rapidly that the par values of money lost all meaning – so despite our ingenuity and effort we were quite unable to cope with the situation effectively. At best our meagre incomes (measured in terms of purchasing power) were only a few drops in the oceans of our needs¹²⁴.

They reached the point where the effort they put into earning the money was counter-productive, as the negative impact caused by the extra work was not balanced by the benefit of a more varied diet¹²⁵. In September 1944 Nesta James was able to obtain a loan that enabled the nurses to buy extra food from the black market, it was to be repaid at 300% interest at the end of the war¹²⁶. The money was loaned from a British internee and the nurses were happy to spend the rest of their lives paying it off if they had money and most importantly, food for the group¹²⁷. The heavy workload of nursing and camp

¹¹⁹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 60.

¹²⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 146

¹²¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 66

¹²² Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 84

¹²³ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 96

¹²⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 57

¹²⁵ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 65

¹²⁶ Kenny, *Captives*, 76

¹²⁷ Simons, *While history passed*, 78

chores, while on a virtual starvation diet, meant the women lacked the ability to fight illness, which further impaired their ability to work¹²⁸. The money they earned went out as easily as it came in and the day arrived when the women reached financial bedrock¹²⁹.

Throughout internment the nurses resourcefully adapted to the difficult scenarios of camp life¹³⁰. From early on a divide developed between the women who arrived at camp with possessions and those who, like the Australian nurses, entered with nothing. Those with possessions and jewels were often snobbish and this created two distinct groups of haves and have nots¹³¹. Wilma Oram lamented that even though the women were all in the compound together there were some with clothes who did not offer any to those without¹³². Catherine Kenny wrote that there was some sharing of clothing among the women. “The nurses were always short of clothes.... Some of the Dutchwomen gave them clothes and lent them sewing machines; in this way they were more generous than two of the few civilian Australians who possessed ample clothes but refused to share”¹³³. This is one of the few references to other Australian women being in the internment camp with the nurses. While the lack of clothing remained a constant issue, the regularity of temperature proved a blessing, as they did not require a substantial amount to facilitate their needs¹³⁴.

Many of the conversations between the women focused on food, recipe ideas and what they planned to eat when they were free¹³⁵. Food rationing was an important job because the supplies given by the captors did not meet the internees’ needs. Betty Jeffrey was a member of this rations committee and while she struggled with the captors her greatest headache was dissatisfied internees¹³⁶. It became a thankless task, as hungry people were not easy to deal with¹³⁷. Florence Trotter stated that, “Food was always scarce, so we

¹²⁸ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 542

¹²⁹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 88

¹³⁰ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 541

¹³¹ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 54

¹³² Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 81

¹³³ Kenny, *Captives*, 57

¹³⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 50

¹³⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 90

¹³⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 42

¹³⁷ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 36

learned to be creative. Privet hedge and hibiscus leaves are quite tasty when made into a soup with a little rice!”¹³⁸ Another problem they encountered was that the Japanese did not understand Western diets. The internees were given rice as the bulk of their food supply and their captors would not be appealed to for any variation in this regime¹³⁹. Inventive ideas were therefore developed to attempt to cook, in differing ways, the rice rations they were given, disguising it as rice puddings, cakes or pastries¹⁴⁰. Their efforts to cook the rice were often thwarted by the walnut to cricket ball-sized stones in it¹⁴¹. Ultimately, the Australian nurses learned the art of surviving on very little food, as the basic material was unresponsive to the best of the group’s creativity¹⁴². Jean Ashton noted that, “Sr Gladys Hughes makes very nice bread from ground rice, salt and water – steamed in a closed tin for some hours. We all like it and spend hours grinding rice in a small wooden mill we found”¹⁴³.

While the internees had freedom to move around their camp they were still fenced in. When food was delivered the Japanese had it dropped outside the compound straight onto the ground and left it for a few days to rot before the women were allowed access to it¹⁴⁴. Sylvia Muir reflected that:

If they did give us some meat or fresh vegetables, they’d put it down on the road outside the barbed wire around the camp. They knew that we knew that if we ventured outside the wire to get it, we’d be shot. The food that was ruined by the sun could have saved many nurses from dying of beriberi. So instead of us eating it, that precious food would sit there for hours, rotting away in the boiling sun. By the time the guards let you go and get the vegetables, more than half would be ruined and stinking¹⁴⁵.

Given the poor rations, the women had to be meticulous in the preparation of the food, nothing could be burned or ruined¹⁴⁶. The enjoyment of small delicacies is highlighted in their recollections. When they found sugar or had

¹³⁸ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4

¹³⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 55

¹⁴⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 56

¹⁴¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 124

¹⁴² Simons, *While history passed*, 55. See also De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 539

¹⁴³ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 18

¹⁴⁴ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 97. See also Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 67. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 8

¹⁴⁵ De Vries, *Heroic Australian Women*, 543. See also Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 97. See also Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 67

¹⁴⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 140

the means to purchase it, they would eat it rather than add it to their cooking “...we just sat down and ate it very slowly. Was it good!”¹⁴⁷ The inclusion of fish in one of their meals was the first protein they had in their diet for over 12 months¹⁴⁸. Out of the necessity to find food some of the women, including the nurses, would risk punishment by attempting a trip through the fence and into the jungle. Some of the women were “badly knocked about” when they were caught in the act¹⁴⁹. The locals would trade goods through the fence; however, the guards discovered this was happening and issued an order that no trading was allowed and this outside help ceased¹⁵⁰.

The internees had work forced on them on top of their other camp chores. In May 1944 work parties were organised to clean the camp and to attend to the overgrown gardens. For some of the women, these outside duties were a relief from their other camp duties, giving them the opportunity to vent their frustrations with physical exertion¹⁵¹. Wood cutting became a dangerous chore as the head of the axe would continually fall off¹⁵². Pat Gunther was knocked unconscious while she attempted to chop wood:

At one stage, we were issued with very springy wood. Quite a few people got black eyes when chopped wood hit them in their faces. I thought I had mastered the technique of wood-chopping until one day, I came to, as Win and Mitzi carried me into the house.... So I joined the black-eyed brigade of which there were several others, as all households were faced with the same wood and the same problems¹⁵³.

The nurses were always looking for different ways to make money to buy food and medicine. Jessie Blanch described an incident when she attempted to sell a rat to the other internees

...we had all sorts of bugs, rats and things. One day they gave us corn for our ration, I had some corn in a little basket tied up on the rafter for my next meal. I looked up when I woke up and here's a rat in it. So I grabbed him and went off to sell him to the Eurasians. I said 'He's a lovely fat and

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 88

¹⁴⁸ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 100

¹⁴⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 102

¹⁵⁰ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 96

¹⁵¹ Kenny, *Captives*, 77

¹⁵² Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 4

¹⁵³ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 45

a good healthy rat! And he popped out of my bag and I lost \$2.50 – they were going to pay me \$2.50 for a rat¹⁵⁴.

The women took any opportunity they could to source more food. Chinese funerals, which happened outside the fence of the camp, provided another means of obtaining rations as the internees ate the food left on the graves by mourners¹⁵⁵. Wilma Oram and Vivian Bullwinkel were elected to sort bananas before they were distributed to the internees, “Viv and I had no money to buy bananas, so we stuffed in as many as we could while we were cutting them...There were ways and means of looking after yourself!”¹⁵⁶

The sleeping arrangements were primitive and they had access to minimal furniture. All internees developed different levels of ingenuity to cope with the deprivation of these conditions. Jenny Greer slept on the table and Nesta James in a cot¹⁵⁷. Pat Gunther described the logistical difficulties of sleeping in such a small space; she wrote that the crowded conditions “...left little room. When Mickey Syer trod on my face one night, I decided to move, and join Beryl Woodbridge on the porch”¹⁵⁸. Some of the nurses were forced to sleep on the floor between the latrines and had to shower under a bucket of water in cubicles without doors where the Japanese guards were able to watch them¹⁵⁹. The lack of water to clean themselves became an issue for hygiene. When it rained the nurses would stand in it and wash themselves, “We haven’t sighted soap for months and are a fine colour! When it rains we still dash out and stand under the nearest piece of leaking roof, the only decent wash we get”¹⁶⁰. The women loved to see a storm coming because they could wash their hair¹⁶¹. Jean Ashton wrote of their desire for a bath,

One thing we all long for is a nice “scenty” piece of soap and a decent hot bath. None of the houses have long baths – just cold showers or

¹⁵⁴ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 7

¹⁵⁵ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 253

¹⁵⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 136

¹⁵⁷ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

¹⁵⁸ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 35

¹⁵⁹ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 7. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 94

¹⁶¹ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 6. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6

‘tongs’ – deep stone bath and you stand outside of it and throw the water over yourself with a dipper, or, wash in the hand basin¹⁶².

In the final internment camp the health of the women had deteriorated so much that some internees would forgo water for bathing as it expended too much energy walking to collect it¹⁶³.

From the beginning of internment the nurses developed the ability to appraise everything they saw and turn it into something useful, becoming adept at salvaging everything they could. If they passed a rubbish tip they would collect anything that could be used¹⁶⁴. Val Smith discovered a piece of armchair during a water-carrying mission

We all thought she was crazy, but then she told us it was full of one-inch nails, which she proceeded to pull out and put away in a small tin. Val made a lot of money with those nails. She mended trompers, crude slippers made of wood with a piece of rubber tubing or tyre nailed across the toes to keep them on¹⁶⁵. (Appendix 5, figure 19)

They cooked meals using an old Mobil Oil tin¹⁶⁶. Another cooking pot they managed to scrounge was called ‘Matilda’¹⁶⁷. When one of the nurses discovered an old toothbrush in the drain she cleaned it and shared it with five other sisters¹⁶⁸. Simons had a travelling rug that became her most useful possession as it was used as a blanket, a mattress and to cover sick patients¹⁶⁹. During camp moves they took everything they could carry. “You have never seen such a shift as that was. We took everything movable, and I mean *everything*”¹⁷⁰. They deliberately hid important possessions from the captors. For Betty Jeffrey and Jean Aston, these were the diaries they both wrote as records of their internment. The manuscripts were hidden out of necessity; Jeffrey’s was sewn inside a small pillow for most of her internment; they wrote

¹⁶² Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 45

¹⁶³ Kenny, *Captives*, 93

¹⁶⁴ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 81

¹⁶⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, page 118. See also Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4.

¹⁶⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 35

¹⁶⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 246

¹⁶⁸ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 107

¹⁶⁹ Simons, *While history passed*, 25

¹⁷⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 36

without the captors knowing they were detailing the events of their lives¹⁷¹. These tactics were employed by all of the internees. One woman hid a diamond ring in her plaited hair so the Japanese could not find it¹⁷².

Horror of Internment

“Soon we were walking the old mental treadmill again – food, cooking, firing, drugs, fever and weakness were the obsessions of the day”¹⁷³

Many of the nurses felt they were wasting the best years of their lives in the prisoner of war camps. Their memoirs detail the horror of their lives in interment. By identifying a number of these events, the fortitude of the women is depicted. They endured starvation, the threat of violence from their captors and the eventual loss of friends due to illness and malnutrition.¹⁷⁴ For Jessie Blanch the harshness of being a captive of the Japanese began from the time she was evacuated from the *Vyner Brooke*. She developed a throat infection in the water and while lying on shore afterwards, sick and miserable, she was kicked by the Japanese as they walked past¹⁷⁵. This infection was an ongoing problem for Blanch and without proper medical intervention it worsened:

When we got salt. I never put in on my food, I'd gargle with it to try and stop my throat infection.... [it] flared up and it was dreadful. [The] Dr came and told me I'd got quinsy, which is an abscess in my throat...one day it burst and the infection went to my ear...[in the hospital] they were able to give me some powder for my throat, but I've been deaf in the left ear ever since¹⁷⁶.

The internees lined up daily for *tenko*, which was a counting process instituted by the guards to ensure all prisoners were still in the camp¹⁷⁷. It was a process that was mentioned often with irritation, as death was the only way people could escape internment. Jessie Simons wrote that “...we had to get ready for *TENKO* or counting time, when the [Japanese] daily assured themselves that

¹⁷¹ Kenny, *Captives*, page xii

¹⁷² Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 5

¹⁷³ Simons, *While history passed*, 101

¹⁷⁴ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 260

¹⁷⁵ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

¹⁷⁶ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 5

¹⁷⁷ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 39

our numbers remained the same”¹⁷⁸. During camp moves the women formed lines and bowed to the captors as they were counted. Sick prisoners often died on the trip and the captors would become angry, as the numbers did not match when they performed *tenko* at the end of the journey¹⁷⁹. Jean Ashton wrote about the captors’ organising of *tenko*. “The counting becomes more strict daily. We are counted now at 7.30a.m. and 5p.m daily. All the captains of houses are shown how they are to bow each time to the Jap Guards. Some of the guards are nasty and faces are slapped”¹⁸⁰. Pat Gunther maintained that, “There are few gestures more condescending than a gentle bow”¹⁸¹. The internees believed that the Japanese did not care about their prisoners and their only interest was following regulations and rules and continually counting the internees¹⁸². While the nurses found the process laborious, they devised a resourceful practice while waiting to be counted; the women would inspect each other’s hair for lice and other parasites¹⁸³. The only time the internees refused *tenko* was at the conclusion of the war when the Japanese remained determined to count the women¹⁸⁴.

The voyeurism of the guards continued throughout internment. The women had to go to the toilet in full view of the guards, whom they learned to ignore as their clothes barely covered them anyway¹⁸⁵. While not giving any specific details, Wilma Oram twice mentions that, “Captain Seiki let his guards do just what they liked to the women”¹⁸⁶. She does make specific mention of one of the guard nicknamed ‘Fatty’, who “...derived pleasure from voyeurism and he was also one of the cruellest guards”¹⁸⁷. Nesta James maintained that there was face slapping in the camp and that the whole group would be punished for the fault of an individual¹⁸⁸. “Violence was a part of life.... In Palembang camp I frequently saw women punched and slapped. I have seen women with their teeth hanging out and faces blackened”¹⁸⁹. Pat Blake slept with an iron bar

¹⁷⁸ Simons, *While history passed*, 54

¹⁷⁹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 164

¹⁸⁰ Ashton, *Jean’s Diary*, 44

¹⁸¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 39

¹⁸² Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, page 270

¹⁸³ Jessie Blanch interview transcript, page 2

¹⁸⁴ Kenny, *Captives*, 98

¹⁸⁵ Kenny, *Captives*, 92. See also Simons, *While history passed*, 35

¹⁸⁶ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 138 and 172

¹⁸⁷ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 140

¹⁸⁸ Nesta James as sited in Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 171

¹⁸⁹ Nesta James as sited in Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 137

near her bed. When questioned about it she responded that they never knew what might happen at night¹⁹⁰.

Many of the internees avoided the captors and tried not to provoke them, as they were unsure when they would become nasty¹⁹¹. The Australian nurses recorded their own stories of physical violence. Jessie Simons wrote that:

Mavis and I were walking along the road on lawful business when we were stopped by an order shouted raucously by an approaching [Japanese soldier]. We pretended not to understand his order, and a moment later he was shouting furiously, slapping our faces and menacing us with his mounted bayonet...until the uproar attracted a number of other internees who distracted the [soldiers] attention long enough for us to slip away... I did not sleep too well that night¹⁹².

The internees constantly felt the threat of execution as it was at the whim of the Japanese if they were kept alive¹⁹³.

The internees also had to endure having their meagre possessions stolen¹⁹⁴. Most of the women tended to believe that they were taken by people living outside the camp, rather than by their fellow prisoners. Simons wrote of one such occasion that, "Much of the luggage had been rifled: jewellery, money and hoarded sugar were among the particular items found missing. Why these valuables had not been guarded as life itself I could not fathom"¹⁹⁵. On another night Vivian Bullwinkel had her shoes stolen; the nurses surmised that the thief had crawled under the wire of the fence¹⁹⁶.

As a result of the starvation diet the women stopped menstruating within a few months of becoming prisoners¹⁹⁷. This was a clear indicator that they were suffering from malnutrition, despite the relief a number of the prisoners felt that it had stopped and they didn't need to source sanitary pads¹⁹⁸. Some of

¹⁹⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 24

¹⁹¹ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 6

¹⁹² Simons, *While history passed*, 63

¹⁹³ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 69

¹⁹⁴ Simons, *While history passed*, 51

¹⁹⁵ Simons, *While history passed*, 83

¹⁹⁶ Simons, *While history passed*, 51

¹⁹⁷ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 260. See also, Angell, *A Woman's War*, 98

¹⁹⁸ Angell, *A Woman's War*, 98

the women even began to lose their hair as a consequence of the lack of nutrients in their diet and the stressful living conditions they were forced to endure¹⁹⁹. The effects the poor diet had on their health were felt by all of the women; even those with more resources suffered during internment. Pat Gunther was approached by a group of teenaged girls, who were concerned they were not developing as they should, and who asked, "Can we talk to you sister?...I assured them once free, and on a decent diet, all would be well..."²⁰⁰.

The women had little access to dental treatment. At the beginning of internment they had one toothbrush, which was shared, the user washing it and then drying it in the sun before the next person brushed her teeth. Over time this wore out, fillings began to fall out, and many suffered from tooth ache²⁰¹. The policy of the Japanese dentist was to remove teeth without anaesthetic²⁰². Trotter stated that, "We...had a visit from a dentist and abscessed teeth were extracted without any injection. The patient, seated on a kitchen chair, hung on grimly..."²⁰³ Gunther recalls Iole Harper's dental treatment:

As I walked into the room next to the hospital where the so-called clinic was held, I met Jeff and a friend carrying a semi-conscious Iole back after treatment...Poor Iole - the wretch had pulled her tooth without an anaesthetic. It took her quite a while to recover²⁰⁴.

Towards the end of internment, the basic necessities of food and water became the overriding concern. They consumed their daily rations in five minutes and they spent the rest of the day feeling hungry²⁰⁵. Betty Jeffrey wrote that, "Today I was so hungry that I could hardly walk.... Iole and I literally hadn't had a thing we could eat...I just flopped on my part of the table outside and prayed for death or something to eat"²⁰⁶. The Japanese decreased, rather than increased, the food and water supplies to keep up with the demands of

¹⁹⁹ Manners, *Bullwinkel*, 165

²⁰⁰ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 87

²⁰¹ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 69

²⁰² Kenny, *Captives*, 65

²⁰³ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 6

²⁰⁴ Darling, *Portrait of a nurse*, 62

²⁰⁵ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 89

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey, *White Coolies*, 96

the weak and hungry²⁰⁷. The Japanese meticulously monitored their weight loss and the amount of food given was based on the amount the internees weighed; the “...camp authorities used combined weight of their inmates to calculate rations [which was] badly under what was required”²⁰⁸. Their daily ration had been reduced to three small bowls of rice a day and vegetables once a day in very small amounts. Often they would not receive vegetables for days and rarely had meat in their meals²⁰⁹. “On reflection it seems probable that we had not more than one pound of meat each during the whole three and a half years of internment”²¹⁰.

At the beginning of their imprisonment the women would throw away rotten food, but over time and nearing starvation, they became accustomed to eating it²¹¹. Two stories in the memoirs related to eating eggs illustrate this point.

Jessie Simons said:

I well remember breaking into a dish the one egg that was the week’s protein and nearly fainting from the odour – it had a ripe abscess...However, after mixing the offender with rice and curry before baking it in a tin over hot coals, I got the mess down and kept it down – with an effort”²¹².

Wilma Oram said that she was proud that she was able to stomach the eggs that had a partly formed embryo in them²¹³. By the completion of the war many of the Australian nurses had dropped to 6 stone or 38kg and some weighed only 5 stone (32kg)²¹⁴.

Throughout their years of internment, the nurses and the other internees developed specific ways of surviving their torment. They used humour in the face of the difficult conditions to raise flagging morale and to make light of incredibly serious situations. They created this resourcefulness as a way to fight boredom, to engage with a civilisation they had been deliberately excluded from and to help keep each other alive and motivated while in the

²⁰⁷ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 172

²⁰⁸ Shaw, *On Radji Beach*, 258

²⁰⁹ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 176

²¹⁰ Simons, *While history passed*, 93

²¹¹ Simons, *While history passed*, 58

²¹² Simons, *While history passed*, 78

²¹³ Angell, *A Woman’s War*, 136

²¹⁴ De Vries, *Heroic Australia Women*, 542

information vacuum that the prisoner of war camp created. They celebrated important events, exchanging gifts for as long as they had the resources to do so, and marked Christmas and New Year in hope of the end of the war and, with it, repatriation to Australia.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This thesis set out to discover if the camaraderie, resourcefulness, ethos and training of a group of World War II nurses as prisoners of the Japanese assisted in their endurance and survival. The thesis also aimed to determine the extent to which these experiences might have been sanitised in the post-war memoirs and statements of the surviving nurses and if there was a consequent distortion of that history

The story of the *Vyner Brooke* nurses is one small part of the history of the AANS contribution to World War II. The individual story of Vivian Bullwinkel's survival during the Radji Beach massacre was reported extensively after the war, but the heroism of her colleagues was largely ignored. This thesis has focused on not only her experience, but also that of the entire group. It argues that their pre-war living-in training and discipline, which followed in the Lucy Osburn-instituted Florence Nightingale system, instilled in them a sense of loyalty and duty to their units — the 2/10th AGH, the 2/13th AGH, the 2/4th CCS – and to the AANS and Australia. The hierarchical structure of nursing, with the Matron firmly in charge, meant they followed their orders absolutely. There was a kinship amongst colleagues, but they also respected their Matrons who, in turn, demonstrated a duty of care to them. They were young, driven women with a sense of adventure, who sailed from Australia to do their part for the war effort.

The fairly relaxed working environment in Singapore in 1941 and their off duty time as tourists meant friendships were solidified and a family-like relationship was created for the nurses. This thesis has argued that the strength of this camaraderie was vitally important when the women were attacked and interned by the Japanese forces. It has also shown the significance of the ethos developed by the Nightingale system of nurse training. When the order to evacuate their hospitals was given, the nurses initially refused to leave their patients until they were forced to go. This action exemplified the nurses' devotion to duty and demonstrated that the patients' needs always came first. Despite being forced to abandon their patients, they continued to nurse while Singapore Harbour was being attacked, and to organise and care for refugees and one another on board ship and after the *Vyner Brooke* was sunk. Their strong sense of camaraderie was evident in the water as they rallied each

other to stay alive and get to shore and endured throughout the long years of their internment.

The combination of shared training and experience gave them strength and discipline during the most difficult of circumstances, including the Radji Beach massacre. The comfort women experience, while considered the most detestable of their internment, also worked to bond the group even closer at the beginning of their imprisonment and reinforced the necessity of being unified. The solidarity engendered by the idea of “us” versus the captors grew from this experience and an understanding developed that their strength lay in sticking together. The deterioration of health due to poor diet and hygiene, which increased their vulnerability, further united the group whose ethos, camaraderie and resourcefulness were tested by the deplorable conditions, lack of medical supplies, poor accommodation and substandard food supplies¹.

Amongst the bleakness, humour became a strong tactic of survival, and larrikin behaviour – so often regarded as a particular characteristic of Australian soldiers – helped the nurses through many difficulties. The women resorted to humour even as they faced death on Radji Beach, as they endured attacks of malaria and beri beri, and during the humiliations of daily prison life. When one of the nurses was depressed, her friends employed humour to cheer her up. The Australian nurses showed the depth of their collegiality each time they helped a fellow sister when she was sick and when they stood together as a group against other difficult internees or their captors.

The experiences of the Australian prisoner of war nurses add further historical context to the masculine stories already in place. Reading their diaries, biographies and autobiographies through the lens of Women’s Autobiography Theory allows them to have a voice and present their own versions of history. While these stories may have been sanitised and not always historically accurate, they still depict the camaraderie of the group, the ethos they lived by and how they negotiated their experience through the masculine society they lived in. Through the act of writing and telling their stories they were able to process these events and so find a way to live with the memories.

War as experienced by Australian men, and how they acted in battle conditions is not only part of the culture and history of Australia, but has often been regarded as the most significant expression of Australian-ness. The ‘digger

¹ Florence Trotter interview transcript, page 4

myth' is about larrikins, stoic in the face of battle, using humour as a technique to ensure their own survival and most importantly, embodying the ideal of 'mateship'. The Australian Nurses of World War II were not included in this myth; neither were their colleagues from other conflicts – nor are they retrospectively included now. Rather, words like 'friendship' and 'kinship' are used to describe the relationship among women in adversity and continue to be the most relevant terms as the mythology of Australians at war reserves the word and ideology of mateship for men.

The pacts of silence the nurses enacted during their time as prisoners, the deliberate aversion to including the whole story of their time in imprisonment through the mutually agreed sanitisation of their history may have distorted the story. But it also strengthened the group, as many held onto this version of the truth for a lifetime. If the women were raped or severely beaten, this was not specifically stated in any of the memoirs cited in this study. The "torture" they referred to appears to have been the deliberate restriction of food and medical supplies, and physical violence and assault but not sexual violence. Despite their inability to assist their dying colleagues and consequent feelings of helplessness, they still offered comfort and kindness.

Despite the possible sanitisation of events and the impossibility of interviewing the nurses involved in these events, it is still possible to conclude that the strength of the group identity helped the women to survive the oppressive conditions. Furthermore, their loyalty to each other, even though their opinions sometimes differed, bonded the women together. Not only did their friendships help them to survive, but also the depth of their camaraderie, as reiterated in all of their memoirs written during internment and later in life. Seventy years after the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* the stories of the prisoner of war nurses show what can be achieved by working together during and after the war.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

AANS PLEDGE OF SERVICE

I pledge myself loyally
to service King and Country
and to maintain the honour and efficiency
of the Australian Army Nursing Service.

I will do all in my power
to alleviate the suffering of
the sick and wounded, sparing no
effort to bring them comfort of body
and peace of mind.

I will work in unity and
comradeship with my fellow nurses.

I will be ready to give assistance
to those in need of my help
and will abstain from any action
which may bring sorrow
and suffering to others.

At all times I will endeavour
to uphold the highest traditions of
Womanhood and of the Professions
of which I am Part.

APPENDIX 2 - Images of the Nurses in Malaya

Figure 1



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

120518

ID Number: 120518 044526 Photograph – Lent for copying by Mrs Allgrove, Nee Sister E.M Hannah.

Sisters of the 2/4th CCS, 8th Division in Malaya 1941

(Left to Right: Back row) Sister Millie Dorsch, Sister Bessie Wilmott, Sister Wilhelmina Raymont, Sister Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, Sister Peggy Farmaner

(Front Row) Sister Dora Gardam, Matron Irene Drummond, Sister Mavis Hannah

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 2



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01344.008

ID Number: P01344.008 Photograph, Malaya: Johore, Tampoi 1941

Sisters of the 2/13th AGH enjoying a cup of tea on the veranda of Ward C1 – After Matron Drummond had left the 2/4th CCS and was replaced as temporary Matron by Kathleen Kinsella.

(Left to Right) Sr V Bullwinkel, Matron I Drummond, Sister M Anderson, Sister M Sellwood

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 3



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01180.004

ID Number: P01180.004 Photograph, Malacca, Malaya 1941 – Donated by C Neal

Staff of the 2/10th Australian General Hospital holding air raid equipment including steel helmets and respirators

(Left to Right: Back row) Sister J Bell, Sister D Elmes, Sister P Gunther

(Front row) Sister B Woodbridge, Sister B Pyman, Sister N Keats

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 4



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01691.001

ID Number: P01691.001 Photograph, Malaya 1941

Group portrait of AANS and other staff of the 2/4th CCS

(Left to Right: Back row) Sister D Gardam, unknown, Sister W Raymont, Sr M Dorsch

(Front row) Matron I Drummond, Sister E Balfour-Ogilvy, unknown, Sister M Hannah, unknown.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 5



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02783.031

ID Number: P02783.031

Matron Olive Dorothy Paschke enlistment photo

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 6



ID Number: P02783.024

Temporary Matron Kathleen (Kit) Kinsella enlistment photo
Australian War Memorial Collection

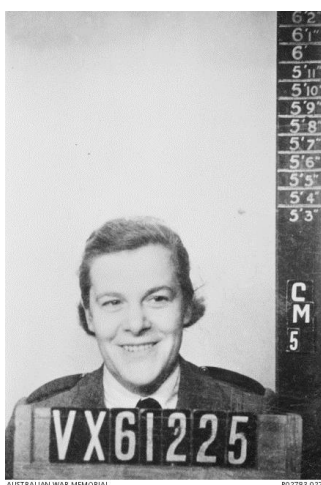
Figure 7



Sister Wilma Oram

Image sourced from: <http://www.angellpro.com.au/oram.htm>

Figure 8



ID Number: P02783.027

Sister Mona Margaret Wilton enlistment photo
Australian War Memorial Collection

Figure 9



ID Number: P02783.002
Sister Elaine Lenore Balfour Ogilvy enlistment photo
Australian War Memorial Collection

Figure 10



ID Number: P02783.010
Sister Alma May Beard enlistment photo
Australian War Memorial Collection

Figure 11



ID Number: P02783.020
Sister Pearl (Mitz) Mittelheuser enlistment photo
Australian War Memorial Collection

Figure 12



ID Number: P02783.019
Sister Pauline Blanche Hempsted
Australian War Memorial Collection
(The spelling of Blanche's last name is Hempsted in her enlistment photo, but she is referred to as Hempstead in the memoirs)

Figure 13



ID Number: P02783.022
Sister Winnie May Davis
Australian War Memorial Collection

Figure 14



Sister Jessie Blanch
Image sourced from: <http://www.angellpro.com.au/blanchie.htm>

Figure 15



Sister Jessie Elizabeth Simons

Image sourced from: <http://www.angellpro.com.au/jess.htm>

Figure 16



Sister Pat Gunther

Image sourced from: <http://www.pows-of-japan.net/articles/81.htm>

APPENDIX 3 - Vyner Brooke Nurses

Lost at Sea off Bangka Island after the bombing of the *Vyner Brooke* on 14 Feb 1942

WFX11169	BATES, Louvinia	2/13 th AGH	14.02.1945
QFX19072	CALNAN, Ellenor	2/13 th AGH	14.02.1945
NFX70938	CLARKE, Mary	2/10 th AGH	14.02.1945
SFX10597	DORSCH, Millicent	2/4 th CCS	14.02.1945
VFX38751	ENNIS, Caroline	2/10 th AGH	14.02.1945
VFX61126	KINSELLA, Kathleen	2/13 th AGH	14.02.1945
QFX22815	McDONALD, Gladys	2/13 th AGH	14.02.1945
VFX38812	PASCHKE, Olive	2/10 th AGH	14.02.1945
NFX70571	RUSSELL, Lavinia	2/10 th AGH	14.02.1945
NFX70520	SCHUMAN, Majorie	2/10 th AGH	14.02.1945
SFX13419	TRENERRY, Annie	13 th AGH	14.02.1945
VFX61225	WILTON, Mona	13 th AGH	14.02.1945

Shot and killed on Radji Beach by Japanese soldiers on 16 February 1942

SFX10596	BALFOUR-OGILVY, Elaine	2/4 th CCS	16.02.1942
WFX11175	BEARD, Alma	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX76284	BRIDGE, Ada Joyce	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
SFX13418	CASSON, Florence	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
VFX38746	CUTHBERTSON, Mary	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
SFX10594	DRUMMOND, Irene	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX70526	ELMES, Dorothy	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
SFX13431	FAIRWEATHER, Lorna	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
WFX3438	FARMANER, Peggy	2/4 th CCS	16.02.1942
VFX47776	HALLIGAN, Clarice	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX76285	HARRIS, Nancy	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
WFX11174	HODGSON, Minnie	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
SFX11647	KEATS, Ellen	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX76279	KERR, Janet	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX76527	McGLADE, Mary	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX70527	NEUSS, Kathleen	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX70991	SALMON, Florence	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX70936	STEWART, Esther	2/10 th AGH	16.02.1942
NFX76281	TAIT, Mona	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
VFX61329	WIGHT, Rosetta	2/13 th AGH	16.02.1942
WFX3429	WILLMOTT, Bessie	2/4 th CCS	16.02.1942

Nurses who died in Japanese Prisoner of War camps 1945

NFX70498	DAVIS, Winnie May	2/10 th AGH	19.07.1945
VFX39351	FREEMAN, Rubina	2/10 th AGH	08.08.1945
TFX2183	GARDHAM, Shirley	2/4 th CCS	04.04.1945
QFX22714	HEMPSTEAD, Blanche	2/13 th AGH	19.03.1945
VFX61331	HUGHES, Gladys	2/13 th AGH	31.05.1945
QFX19068	MITTELHEUSER, Pearl	2/10 th AGH	18.08.1945
TFX6012	RAYMONT, Wilhemina	2/4 th CCS	08.02.1945
VFX48842	SINGLETON, Irene	2/10 th AGH	20.02.1945

The nurses returned to Australia October 1945

SFX13548	ASHTON, Carrie Jean	2/13 th AGH
NFX70528	BLAKE, Kathleen	2/10 th AGH
QFX19074	BLANCH, Jessie	2/10 th AGH
VFX61330	BULLWINKEL, Vivian	2/13 th AGH
NFX76282	CLANCY, Veronica	2/13 th AGH
QFX19071	DELFORCE, Cecilia	2/10 th AGH
NFX70449	DOYLE, Jess	2/10 th AGH
NFX70493	GUNTHER, Janet	2/10 th AGH
NFX70937	GREER, Jean	2/10 th AGH
SFX10595	HANNAH, Ellen Mavis	2/4 th CCS
WFX11172	HARPER, Iole	2/13 th AGH
VFX39347	JAMES, Nesta	2/10 th AGH
VFX53059	JEFFREY, Betty	2/10 th AGH
QFX22822	McELNEA, Violet	2/13 th AGH
QFX22816	MUIR, Sylvia Jessie	2/13 th AGH
VFX58783	ORAM, Wilma	2/13 th AGH
QFX19073	OXLEY, Christian	2/10 th AGH
QFX22911	SHORT, Eileen	2/13 th AGH
TFX6023	SIMONS, Jessie	2/13 th AGH
QFX22819	SMITH, Valerie	2/13 th AGH
WFX11105	SYER, Ada	2/10 th AGH
QFX19077	TROTTER, Florence	2/10 th AGH
QFX19070	TWEDDELL, Joyce	2/10 th AGH
VFX53060	WOODBIDGE, Beryl	2/13 th AGH

APPENDIX 4 – Image of the *Vyner Brooke* and maps showing the movement of nurses during internment

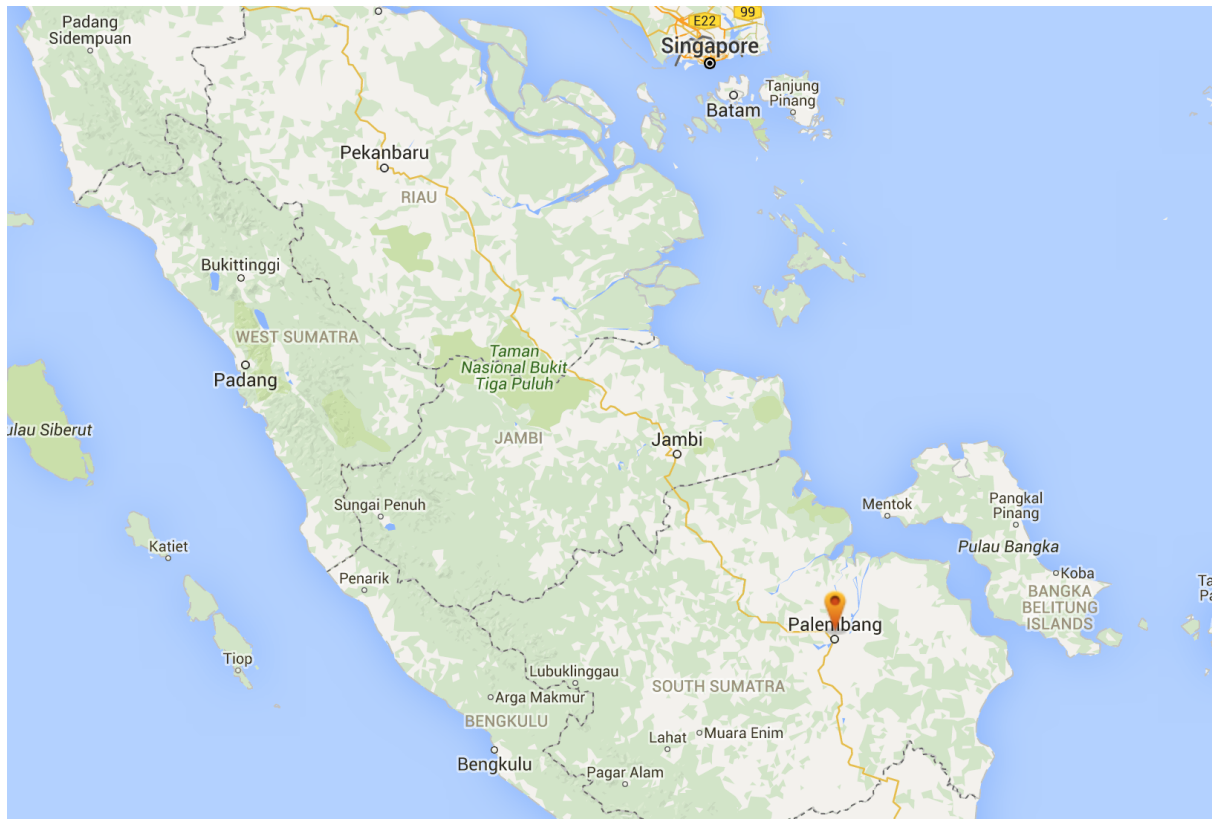
Figure 16



Photo of the *Vyner Brooke* at anchor in 1932. Before the outbreak of World War Two the ship had been owned by the Sarawak Steamship Company.

Photo sourced from: "Muntok Peace Museum" –
http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/?page_id=27 – site accessed 12/03/2016

Figure 17



Map of Indonesia indicating the locations of Singapore, Mentok, Palembang and Lubuklinggau (described in the memoirs as Loebok Linggau)

Map sourced from “Muntok Peace Museum” - <http://muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Map-of-Area-1.png>

Also located at:

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/place/Lubuklinggau,+Lubuklinggau+City,+South+Sumatra,+Indonesia/@-3.3021309,102.0995651,7z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x2e30e25ac964e19b:0x3039d80b220cc30>

Figure 18



Map of the movement of nurses during Internment from Muntok to Palembang and their last camp at Loebok Linggau.

Map sourced from "Muntok Peace Museum" – <http://www.muntokpeacemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Routes-to-Maps.png> - site accessed 12/03/2016

APPENDIX 5 - Drawings by POWs during internment

Figure 19



ART29436 – “Footwear, Palembang” pencil on paper

Drawn by Pat Gunther in Palembang, Sumatra c 1942-45 –

Australian War Memorial collection - acquired 1989

Figure 20



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

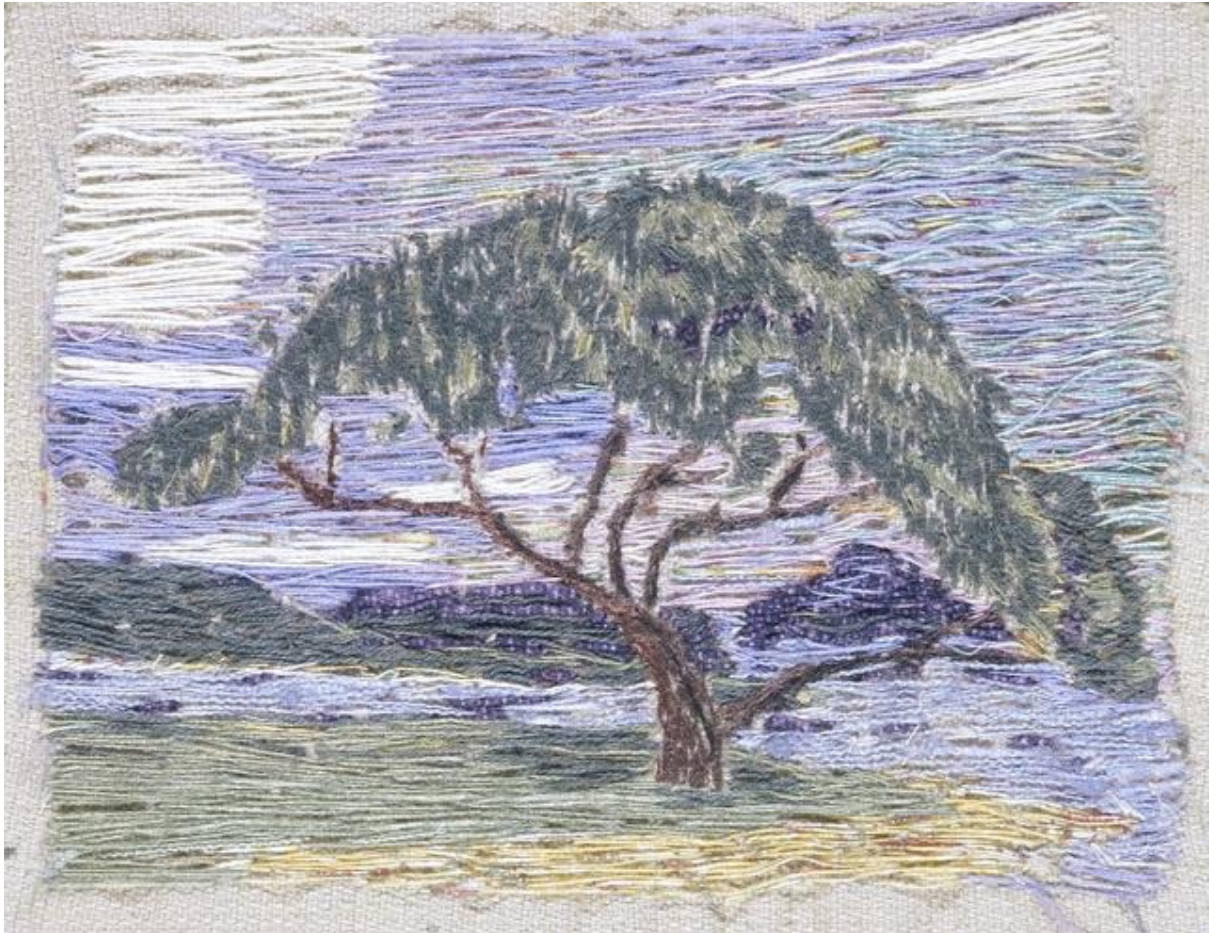
ART29440

ART29440 "House 8, Palembang" pencil on paper

Drawn by Pat Gunther in Palembang, Sumatra, c 1942 -45

Australian War Memorial collection - acquired in 1989

Figure 21



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART90951

ART90951 "Gum tree" – embroidery

Sewn in Palembang by Pat Gunther, Sumatra, in 1994

Australian War Memorial collection – acquired in 1998

Figure 22



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

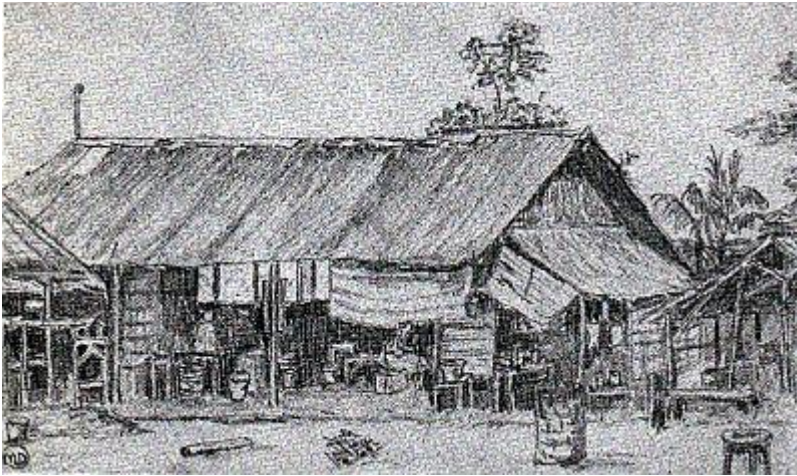
ART29445

ART29445 "Dutch nun at the camp hospital, Palembang" – pencil on paper

Drawn by Pat Gunther in Palembang, Sumatra, c. 1942 -45

Australian War Memorial collection – acquired in 1989.

Figure 23

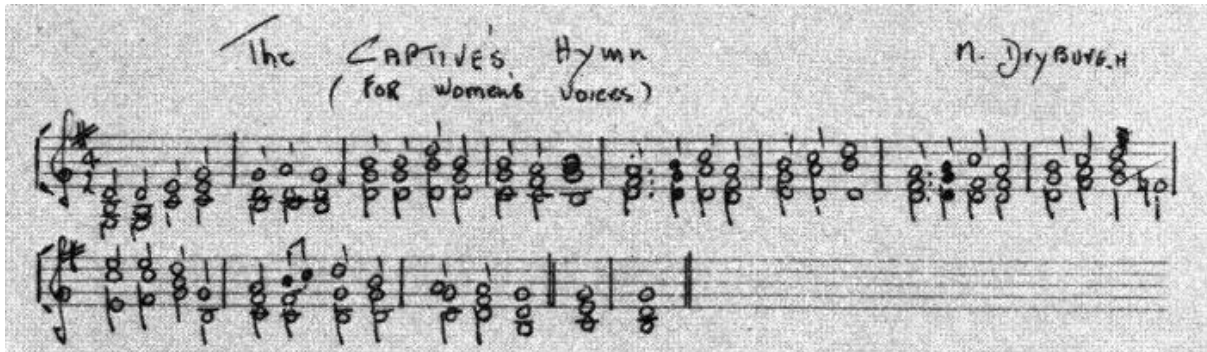


A drawing of the Palembang Barracks by Scottish Missionary Margaret Dryburgh.

Picture sourced from "Singing to Survive": <https://singingtosurvive.com/the-vocal-orchestra-1943-44/> - site accessed 16/03/2016

APPENDIX 6 – “The Captive’s Hymn”

Words and music by Mrs Dryburgh a Scottish missionary interned with the *Vyner Brooke* nurses and sung for the first time on Sunday 5th July 1942



(Image sourced from “Singing to Survive” - <https://singingtosurvive.com/2013/05/03/the-captives-hymn/> - site accessed 16/03/2016)

Father, in captivity
We would lift our prayer to Thee
Keep us ever in Thy love.
Grant that daily we may prove
Those who place their trust in Thee
More than conquerors may be.

Give us patience to endure,
Keep our hearts serene and pure,
Grant us courage, charity,
Greater faith, humility,
Readiness to own Thy will,
Be we free, or captive still.

For our county we would pray,
In this hour be Thou she stay,
Pride and selfishness forgive,
Teach her by Thy laws to live,
By Thy grace may all men see
That true greatness comes from Thee.

For our loves ones we would pray,
Be their Guardian night and day,
From all danger keep them free,
Banish all anxiety.
May they trust us to Thy care,

Know that Thou our pains dost share.

May the day of freedom dawn,
Peace and Justice be reborn.
Grant that nations, loving Thee,
O'er the world may brothers be,
Cleansed by suffering, know rebirth,
See Thy Kingdom come on earth. (White Coolies, 47)

APPENDIX 7 - Images of POWs after evacuation 1945

Figure 24



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

044480

ID Number: 044480 Photograph

Photograph taken of the nurses after their release from internment all wearing what was left of their AANS uniforms.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 25



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01015.005

ID Number: P01015.005 Photograph – September 1945 Singapore Hospital
Sister Jess Doyle (NFX70449) of the 2/10th AGH recuperating after release
Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 26



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

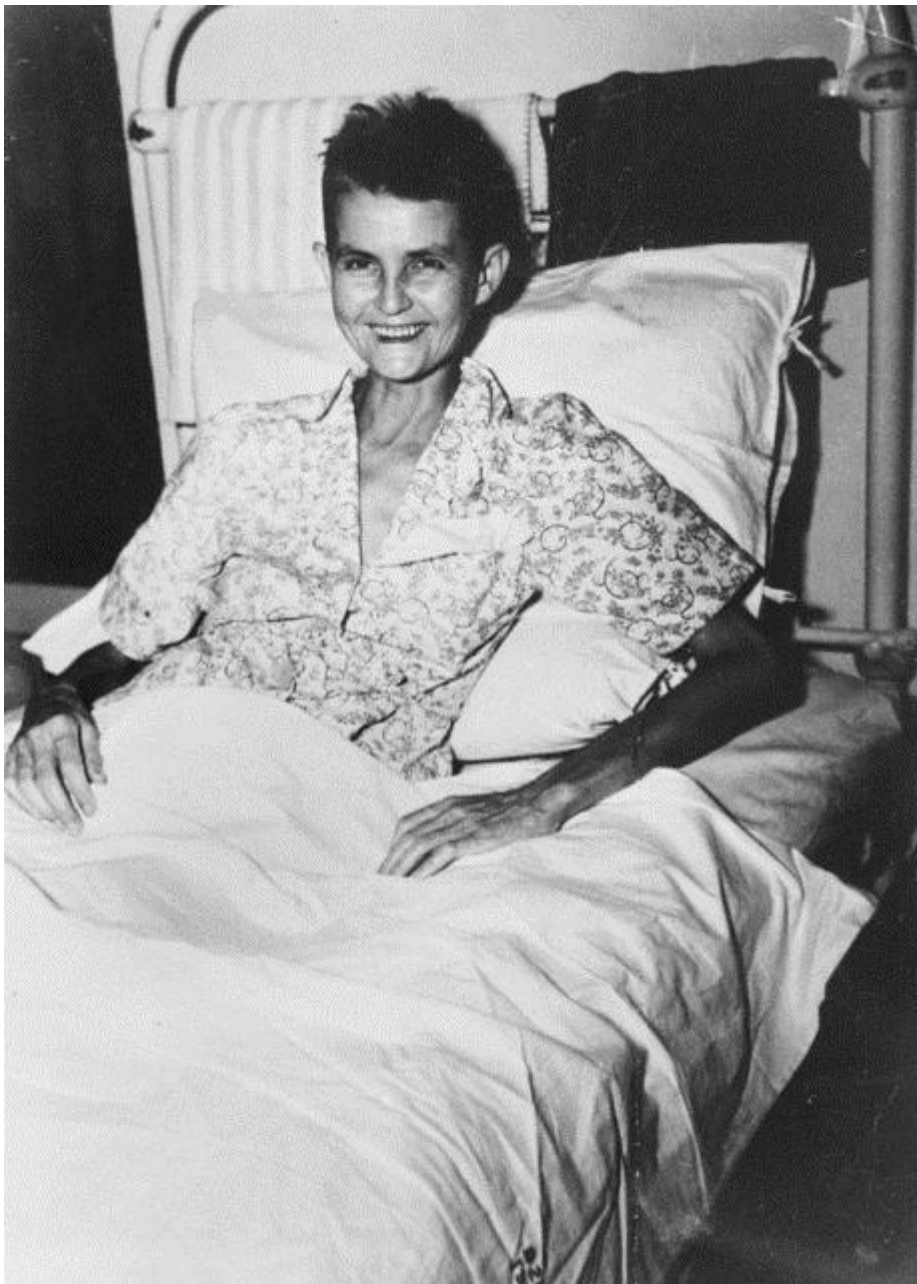
305369

ID Number: 305369 Photograph – September 1945

Sister Jean (Jenny) Greer and Sister Betty Jeffrey recuperating from malnutrition in hospital after release from internment.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 27



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01015.007

ID Number: P01015.007 Photograph – September 1945

Sister Eileen Short recuperating in hospital after release from the Belalau Prisoner of War camp.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 28



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

019195

ID Number: 019195 Photograph – September 1945, Singapore

Private Robert Harvey Gill (QX10305) of the 8th Division recuperating in hospital after his release from Changi Prison – his emaciated condition is evident.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 29



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

019199

ID Number: 019199 Photograph, Singapore 1945

A hospital ward in Singapore showing the members of the 8th Division after release from the Changi Prisoner of War camp – all were suffering from malnutrition.

From nearest to camera: T Chiplin, S Wales, FV Wart, J Campbell, JA Damien, GW Rogers, WJ Brown, GC Twysel.

Australian War Memorial collection

Figure 30



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01701.003

ID Number: P01701.003 Photograph

Vyner Brooke Prisoner of War nurses on board the hospital ship *Manunda* after its arrival in Australia.

Australian War Memorial collection

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National Archives transcript PBX430 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 14/09/1945 5.50am – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX517 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 5.35am Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX 518 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 2.15am Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX519 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 2.26am – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX562 – Dunston – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 7.50pm – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX563 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945, no time recorded on transcript - Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX574 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 7.55am– Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX582 – Haydon Lennard - Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 9.20am – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript PBX587 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 12.15am – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript XB0660 – Haydon Lennard – Cable and Wireless ltd to Broadnews Sydney 15/09/1945 10.00am - Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript XPBX21 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 16/09/1945 5.00pm – Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript XPBX27 – Haydon Lennard – Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 2.30am - Australian War Memorial

National Archives transcript XPBX28 – Haydon Lennard– Beam Wireless to Press Broadnews Sydney 17/09/1945 5.35am - Australian War Memorial

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