

Vivian Bullwinkle 18 Dec 1915 - 3 Jul 2000

Vivian - AO MBE ARRC* ED* FNM* FRCNA*, sole survivor of the Bangka Island Massacre where the Japanese Army massacred 21 Army nurses and one elderly civilian woman. Taken POW and survived the hell camps of Sumatra, going on to become one of Australia's most distinguished women.

Vivian became a member of staff in the newly formed 13th Australian General Hospital (13th AGH) and in September of that year their unit sailed on the Hospital Ship Wanganella to Singapore. On the morning of December 7th 1941 the Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbour and at the same time General Yamashita's 25th Japanese Army invaded Malaya. Singapore was bombed and the Japanese began were fighting their way down the Malaysian Peninsula towards the island of Singapore. The fighting was fierce and the casualties heavy, by the end of January 1942 the 13th AGH was forced to evacuate to Singapore Island, again in February, with either surrender or annihilation facing them, Colonel A.P. Derham, Assistant Director for Medical Services for the Australian 8th Division, and another officer, Lt.Colonel Gly White, decided to evacuate the 131 nurses and as many casualties as was possible from Singapore by ship. 65 nurses plus as many patients as possible evacuated on the SS Vyner Brooke. The ship cleared port under darkness but was attacked by Japanese planes on the following morning. The ship received three direct hits, with the Bridge totally destroyed, no steering and on fire the Captain gave orders to abandon ship. The ship sank in approximately 15 minutes.

All night long exhausted survivors from the Vyner Brooke and other shipwrecks kept coming ashore and by morning almost sixty men, women and children and 22 members of the AANS were gathered on Radji beach. They were all in need of food and water so a search party, which included Vivian and five other nurses, was dispatched to a nearby village. The village men feared Japanese reprisal and turned the search party away. Fresh water springs were eventually found at the end of the beach.

A large lifeboat carrying British servicemen also washed ashore swelling the numbers of survivors on the Radji beach to almost 100. The group decided to surrender themselves to the Japanese and a small group left in search of the Japanese forces. In the meantime Matron Drummond suggested that mothers, children, and other civilian women start making their way toward the village; this suggestion was to be a life saving move for many. The nurses, including the Matron and one elderly woman (who wished to remain at her husband's side) agreed to remain with the injured, helped the women and children organized themselves for their walk to the next village.

Later Japanese troops arrived and they ordered half of the men were marched at bayonet point down the beach and out of sight behind a headland. A few minutes later the Japanese soldiers returned and gathered up the remaining men, heading them off in the same direction; a short time later gunfire was heard. Later the Japanese soldiers reappeared and ominously motioned for the women to stand up. Not one woman cried, not one woman whimpered and not one of them tried to run away. They had no weapons and they knew that the men from the beach were dead. They also knew that they would not be rescued, it was pointless to run, and besides, where could they go? The soldiers began pushing them towards the knee-high surf. They stood in a straight line, 22 nurses and one elderly civilian woman facing the horizon. Wearing their Red Cross emblems on their sleeves, a symbol supposedly of neutrality and medical aid should have protected them. No one spoke, no one wept, and when they reached waist deep water, the Japanese opened fire with a machine gun.

[1]" They just swept up and down the line and the girls fell one after the other," Bullwinkle was to recall. She watched Matron Drummond disappear beneath the waves; the bullet that was meant for Vivian struck her in the flesh above her left hip. The force of the round threw her into the waves where she floated. She began to swallow salt water and became nauseous she knew that if she vomited, or showed any movement whatsoever, the Japanese would finish her off. She held her breath, stealing a little air here and there and, although she couldn't swim, she floated and slowly the current brought her closer to the shore.

Though wounded, Vivian was the sole survivor of the massacre. [1] "*Finally,*" she was to say later, "*...I plucked up enough courage to sit up...I looked around and there was no sign of anybody...there was nothing. Just me*".

Vivian came ashore and walked up a narrow path, away from the beach and into the jungle, some twenty yards into the jungle and rested. At daylight she awoke, hot and thirsty, she thought of the springs, but stopped herself from moving, for at that moment she spotted a line of Japanese soldiers back on the beach. ^[1] "My heart went to the bottom of the feet again" she said.

After the Japanese left she made for the springs where she recuperated a little with fresh water and also found Private Kingsley, a British soldier who had survived being shot and bayoneted. Vivian and Kingsley remained hidden in the jungle for 12 days, although wounded herself, Vivian, attended to Kingsley's wounds and procured whatever food she could from the local inhabitants. Vivian realized that they could not go on like this, which led her to the inescapable conclusion that they would have to give themselves up again. Kingsley agreed, but asked her to wait 24 hours. ^[1] "*I'll be thirty nine tomorrow and I'd like to think I had my thirty ninth birthday free*", she remembered him saying. ^[1] "*Time is no object*" she said, and the next day they celebrated his birthday in the jungle. On February 28, Vivian and Private Kingsley gave themselves up to the Japanese and were taken to a POW Camp. At the camp Vivian was reunited with her life long friend Wilma Oram and the 31 other nurses who had survived the tragic Singapore escape. After a short rest was able to recant what had happened to her and the fate of the other nurses. She was saddened to hear that Private Kingsley had since died from his wounds shortly after their arrival.

Vivian became one of the 32 Australian nurses who now faced the prospect of being prisoners of the Japanese for many months, perhaps years. For 18 months in captivity Vivian and her colleagues endured the hardships and the brutality of camp life. Vivian was determined to survive to bear witness to the massacre of her 21 nursing colleagues. She lived to return home and tell her story, for without her, her friends would be forgotten. Vivian was able to fulfill her wish, in that she told her story as a witness to murder and brutality against humanity at the 1947 Tokyo War Crimes Trial.

Fifty years after she came ashore on Bangka Island, Vivian returned with some of the other nurses, to pay one last tribute to their colleagues. She and her fellow POWs, stood on a beach at a point which they felt to be near the site of the murders, and here they unveiled a shrine to the 41 nurses from the Vyner Brooke who did not return.

Lest We Forget

^[1] with help from many DVA and Military internet web site articles.

ARRC* - Associate of the Royal Red Cross

ED* - Efficiency Decoration

FNM* - Florence Nightingale Medal

FRCNA* - Fellow Royal College Nursing Australia