

## *VIVIAN*

SINGAPORE, LATE 1941

Born in Kapunda, South Australia, in 1915, Vivian's life growing up was a happy one. Her first ambition was to become a sports teacher. It had been her mother who suggested she try nursing.

'You'd make a wonderful nurse, Viv. These are difficult times — we can't always support you. You need to be able to make a living.'

It was indeed a difficult time — it was the 1930s and Australia was in the grip of the Great Depression. As Vivian became an adult, the world entered even more dangerous times, and World War II loomed.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, England declared war on Germany. Consequently, Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies declared, 'Australia is also at war.' Vivian was by that time an experienced nurse working at St

Joseph's Hospital in Melbourne. Like many other young Australians, she wanted to 'do her bit'. Her brother, John, joined the Royal Australian Air Force and Vivian thought she would do the same. She was tall, strong, healthy and athletic, but to her surprise she was rejected. She wrote to her mother:

*Can you believe it, Mother, they say I have flat feet!  
I told them it's made no difference to my nursing. I  
have strong ankles and anyway I'm not joining up to  
do hours of marching, I won't even be wearing boots!  
But that's their policy, so no go.*

Vivian was not one to be put off by a setback. An opportunity arose to join the Australian Army and travel overseas as a nurse, providing you were aged at least twenty-five years old and had already been promoted to sister and in charge of a ward. This time, Vivian was accepted. She was eager to help the war effort and be part of an adventure with the Australian Army Nursing Service.

Vivian was twenty-six when she arrived in the British colony of Singapore with other nurses from the 2<sup>nd</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion. In Singapore, considered the centre of defense against the Japanese, her group of nurses joined the nurses of two other battalions already stationed

there. Their job was to care for sick and injured Australian soldiers who had been fighting the Japanese army in the Malayan jungle.

Supervising the 2<sup>nd</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion nurses was Matron Irene Drummond. She loved the women in her charge, making them tea and checking how they were coping far away from home. She wasn't yet forty, but she often felt like a mother to them all, and their welfare was just as important to her as that of the patients.

The hospital they were assigned to was still in the process of being converted for them from St Patrick's School and Chapel. The surgical wards weren't ready, but the army kept the nurses there for a few weeks to tend the few patients they had. They were all experienced nurses, but not so experienced in tropical diseases of the sort that afflicted soldiers in the jungle, so at 'St Pat's' they attended lectures, which were very successful. They were also given some practice at marching on parade. This was not so successful.

Marching in unison, flat feet or no, didn't rate highly on their list of priorities. In the end, parade was abandoned and the nurses went back to their real job.

By early December 1941, the nurses had been transferred to another hospital, Tampoi, near Johor Bahru. Johor

Bahru was just over the causeway that joined Singapore to the Malayan Peninsula. Tampoi had been a mental hospital before the war. The wards were spread out over a large piece of ground, which meant a lot of walking — and cycling — but at least a surgical ward had now been added. The war was getting closer, and casualties had started arriving. The nurses were busier, but in between shifts the off-duty nurses were still able to hitch a ride with an ambulance across the causeway into Singapore city and enjoy a social life. Singapore had much to offer.

When Vivian and her group of nurses arrived in Singapore, they were introduced to a culture that was very different to Australia. Singapore was a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural city, home to the local Malay people, Chinese, Indian, and colonial British. It was a heady experience.

The nurses were popular with the young Australian and British officers stationed in Singapore, who often invited them to go out dancing or on dinner dates — most had never tasted Asian cooking before. Army food was less appealing. On their very first morning in Singapore the nurses had looked in dismay at the tinned herrings in tomato sauce on their plates. The irrepressible Sister Blanche Hempstead from Queensland had proclaimed, 'Jeez, look at that! They're giving us bloody goldfish for breakfast!'

On the evening of 8 December 1941, a few of the off-duty nurses, including Vivian, were relaxing together in the rest room when Matron Drummond came in.

'I thought you girls would be out dancing tonight at the ANZAC Club,' Matron remarked.

She liked to see the nursing sisters enjoying themselves. They were all single women — married women couldn't be nurses in those days — and they had officer status, which came with plenty of social opportunities.

'Pool party! We're invited to a pool party, Matron!'

'Well, I'm in, I have my swimming togs. In this heat, I can't think of anything nicer!'

'We're also invited to play golf.'

'Golf can wait, I'm going to sit in that nice cool water all afternoon 'til I look like a prune!' said Minnie.

Minnie Hodgson, from the tiny town of Yealering in the West Australian wheatbelt, was a country girl at heart. As a teenager she had even run away from her Perth boarding school and back to the farm. Sometimes the city girls teased her about her affection for the bush, but she had been happy nursing at Kondinin in the wheatbelt.

Peggy Farmanar was also a Western Australian, from Claremont in Perth. 'No doubt you have a line of hopeful,

hunky farmers waiting at home, Minnie, but the world needs to see more of you on the dance floor. Kick your heels up while you can!’ Peggy said.

Minnie was silent. In fact, the young farmer she was keen on, and with whom she thought she had an ‘understanding’, had recently decided to marry someone else. It was partly because of this that she had decided to leave the wheatbelt, join army nursing and undergo an uncharacteristic adventure.

‘Sister Farmanar is right, you should have a bit of fun now, while the hospital is still relatively quiet.’

‘I meant while she’s in the Lion City, Matron! Singapore nightlife has a lot more to offer than Kondinin. Nursing in the country — well, you don’t see the high life, do you? And as for Yealering – that’s not much more than a railway siding! Isn’t that right, Minnie?’

‘Yes, but there are dances in the hall,’ Minnie replied.

‘Ah, but do you have flowers and an orchestra like at the Embassy Ballroom in South Perth?’ Peggy insisted. ‘Bessie, back me up here!’

Bessie Wilmot was also from Perth. She had grown up in the suburb of Como, close to the Embassy Ballroom, but hadn’t been dancing there often.

‘Mind you,’ resumed Peggy, still full of enthusiasm for

dancing, ‘even the Embassy doesn’t compare to the Raffles Ballroom! See Raffles and die — it’s gorgeous! Don’t you reckon, Bully?’

Vivian put down her pen. She had been writing to her mother.

‘It *is* splendid,’ Vivian agreed. ‘I was there last weekend with Jim Austin.’

A chorus of ‘Oohs!’ went around the room.

‘So, tell us about Lieutenant Austin, Bully!’ Peggy demanded. ‘Where did you meet?’

‘Oh, well, I bumped into him at St Pat’s — in outpatients.’

‘And ...? *And* Vivian ...?’

‘I knew him from the Military Training Camp back home. He’s Field Artillery — 2nd/15th. Getting treated for a bug he picked up in the jungle.’

‘And ...?’ They were all in the game now.

‘We had a nice evening out.’

‘Ooooh!’

Peggy was still dreaming of the Raffles ballroom and its embroidered curtains and marble floor.

‘Hope you dressed up, Bully.’

‘Well, I did my best, but there were some very opulent evening gowns on display — I doubt if they saw me as competition.’

‘Oh, go on, Viv! I’ll bet heads turned when you sailed in all stately! Don’t you think, Lainie?’

Elaine Balfour-Ogilvie came from a big property at Renmark in South Australia. She was often reading, her dark, bobbed hair falling across her face. Now she looked up from her book with her sweet serene smile.

‘There certainly are advantages in being tall, Viv.’

‘Well, it probably helps my tennis.’

‘You must enjoy the tennis parties they throw here, Sister Bullwinkel. That serve of yours is the talk of the town!’ Matron Drummond laughed. Vivian had trained under her at Broken Hill Hospital, and Matron knew how much Vivian loved tennis.

‘Did you hear, Lanie, that Matron Drummond is going to dine on Boxing Day at the Sultan of Johor’s Palace?’

Peggy and Elaine were both impressed.

‘Matron, you dark horse!’

‘It’s an official visit, Sister Farmanar! The Sultan sold this hospital to the Australian government. He still has an interest in it, and we need to get more equipment organised.’

Elaine had heard stories about the Sultan’s Palace. ‘Is it truly all furnished in gold?’

‘Apparently it is. I’ve been told we’ll even eat off a gold plate with gold cutlery!’

‘Like a fairy tale!’ exclaimed Minnie.

Vivian recounted the story of their fellow nursing sisters Wilma Oram and Mona Wilton dancing at the Sultan’s palace. The two women had been waiting in a club at Johor for an ambulance ride into Singapore, and an elderly gentleman had offered them a lift in his car. He had turned out to be the Sultan himself and had then invited them to the party. There ensued a lot of interesting speculation about how others might wangle an invitation. Peggy reckoned they should offer Elaine’s services at a concert for the Sultan.

‘She has the most beautiful singing voice. You should hear her sing “A Nightingale in Berkely Square”. Go on, Lanie, give it a whirl!’

‘I’m a nurse, Peggy, not an entertainer!’

‘Well, you could be a professional singer! She sings to the patients sometimes; they just love it. I’ll bet you could sing for your supper.’

Minnie turned to Vivian.

‘Tell them about when you and Nancy Harris went to dinner on Sir Charles Brooke’s ship, Bully.’

The others were astonished.

‘The *Vyner Brooke*, the White Rajah’s little tub?’

‘He owns most of Sarawak!’

‘Fancy having a ship named after yourself! Now that is fancy!’

‘It gets used as a freighter, but it’s also his private yacht when he needs it.’

‘What’s he like, Sir Charlie?’

‘Oh, he wasn’t there!’ answered Vivian, laughing. ‘It’s been taken over by the British for the war effort. It was fun. The Brit engineer on board, Jimmy Miller — lovely bloke — he was throwing a dinner and needed a couple of extras, so Nancy and I got invited.’

Peggy loved a party. ‘Hope we all get to see it one day.’

‘We’ve seen such a lot already. I have to say I love Singapore — the sampans and the junks ... and the smells ...’

Peggy groaned. ‘Bedpans and antiseptic!’

Vivian’s hearty laugh was infectious. ‘Not the hospital! I meant the sandalwood and spice, it’s so exotic!’

‘Yes, so are Singapore’s drains!’

The laughter died down and suddenly they realised it was late. Everyone was thinking of bed and Matron, as usual, was playing mother hen.

‘I reckon we’re going to be extra busy soon, girls, so you may as well get your beauty sleep.’

As they started to gather up their things, Bessie voiced what everyone was thinking.

‘The fighting’s getting closer, Matron.’

‘Yes, I’m afraid it is.’ Matron stopped to polish her glasses. She never liked to show she was worried, but she believed in being realistic. ‘So, no doubt we’ll be seeing more casualties. We must be prepared.’

They all knew how rapidly the Japanese forces were swooping through Malaya and that the Allies needed more troops on the ground to resist them. They would likely soon be seeing some dreadful battle wounds. The nurses’ job was to reassure patients, and the stalwart matron’s job was to reassure the nurses.

‘We’re ready to deal with this, it’s what we trained for.’

Bessie was thinking of the many times already the sirens had sounded.

‘The patients on the verandah are getting fed up with being gathered up and plonked inside.’

‘Only reconnaissance planes, apparently,’ replied Matron. ‘But you can’t be too careful. Practice makes perfect.’

‘Blanche wants to win the darts championship at the Officers’ Mess, so there’d better not be an air raid practice tonight!’

Minnie laughed. ‘They wouldn’t dare!’ Everyone laughed.

Bessie shook her fist at the sky with mock ferocity.

‘Blanche would soon give ’em what for!’

‘I do love Blanche — she’s a hoot!’ Minnie said. ‘They grow them tough up in Brisbane. I hadn’t met many Queenslanders before the war. You know, you girls — you’re all a great bunch. I feel very lucky to be here.’

Vivian moved to the window — she had noticed strange lights in the sky over Singapore: red, blue and yellow. They all moved to look.

Matron realised first. ‘It’s tracer fire. They’re firing from aircraft!’

The women were all shocked into silence. The planes were coming into view, they could hear them now.

‘Are they ours?’ someone asked.

Matron spoke quietly. ‘Look at the wings — the red dots — they’re Japanese.’

The nurses exchanged looks. It had begun. Singapore was under attack.

## EDIE

MALAYA, JANUARY 1942

Edie had just returned to school after the Christmas holidays when her world changed.

Edie’s family was British but lived in Malaya because they had a business near Kuala Lumpur. Her parents had divorced, and Edie had been at boarding school since she was five years old. Edie was short for Edith, although she really wanted to be called ‘Betty’ — she had decided when quite small to ‘swap’ her name with her Betty Boop doll, but the nuns who taught at her school dismissed the idea. Edie loved the lush green mountains around her home; at school she was sometimes homesick, and in her early days at the convent she would escape from the classroom to her favourite hiding place inside a grandfather clock. The tick tock of the clock reminded her of home, it was forever to be a comforting sound for Edie.

At Edie’s convent school in Malaya the conflict in Europe

had always seemed far away. The maps on the classroom walls had changed from just showing countries. Now they showed 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' countries. Friendly were coloured blue and unfriendly were red.

Eddie's father had gone to fight in the war as a pilot in the British Royal Airforce. Of course, she knew Germany was Britain's enemy and Austria, too, since it was under German rule. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland soon joined with Germany. That had seemed a lot of countries to be at war with, but during the months after the war started, the number of countries in Europe invaded by Germany had quickly grown and seemed quite overwhelming. Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, Greece, all had been occupied by the German army. Eddie felt very sad for them. The map at school had kept changing. The red grew and grew.

Eddie felt as though her father had disappeared into a big red yawning mouth on the other side of the world and that the German leader, Adolf Hitler, was like a hungry monster gobbling up everything in his path.

At school the nuns talked a lot about the friendly nations. They were the allies that fought with Britain — Canada, Australia, South Africa and the Soviet Union. Their countries looked large on the map, compared to tiny

Britain, so that was comforting.

Italy was unfriendly — they had joined on the side of the Germans, and Eddie was very sorry about that. Her class had studied the ancient Romans in history, and she really wanted to go to Rome one day. In fact, there were many places in Europe that Eddie had planned to visit when she grew up. She very much hoped the war would be over by then. War seemed so pointless, why couldn't everyone live peacefully?

When she had gone home for school holidays, Eddie had tried sometimes to follow the war reports in the newspapers. Things didn't seem to be going very well. There was a lot of fighting between the two sides going on in lots of places, even in North Africa. It seemed unfair that so many parts of the world had been drawn into the fighting, but at least her own life was relatively safe and uneventful. Eddie was reading a book of old French fairytales. She definitely preferred reading stories in books to reading the newspaper.

However, now, suddenly, the world had changed again. Eddie's grandpa came to collect her from school. Britain and the Allies had another enemy; Japan had joined with Germany against them, and the war had come to Malaya!

Eddie was afraid — what would they do now? Grandpa



told her that the Japanese Emperor wanted to make Asia only for Asians and get rid of all Europeans living there. Edie knew there were many Malay people who did not want to be a British colony any longer, but they didn't want to be occupied by Japan, either. Japan had been at war with China since 1937 and had occupied part of north-east China. Many Chinese had died there. Now the Japanese were rapidly marching through Thailand and the north of Malaya. It was time for Edie to leave.

Grandpa had some friends in America. He wondered at first whether Edie should go and stay with them for a while and go to school there. America hadn't wanted to be a part of the war, but when, on 7 December 1941, the Japanese had bombed American ships at their Honolulu naval base in Hawaii, the United States had decided to join the Allies. Grandpa said this was lucky as the Allies needed American help to win the war. The United States was very big on the map, so Edie felt glad they were helping. But with the war expanding it might be dangerous to try and travel there. Now there was war all around the world — people fighting the war in foreign lands, people fleeing as refugees and people being evacuated, like Edie — so many people dreaming of home.

So, Grandpa had taken Edie to Singapore. Singapore was

on the edge of Malaya, but it was under British rule, and he hoped they would be able to get to England or Australia from there. Edie was both nervous and excited about the prospect of a new home.

## VIVIAN

SINGAPORE, JANUARY 1942

The nurses had been able to enjoy some Christmas and New Year celebrations; Mona Wilton and Wilma Oram had even managed to meet a couple of British officers at the Raffles Hotel on New Year's Day, before doing a bit of shopping at Robinsons department store. Mona and Wilma were famous among the nurses for their nights out 'on the town'. But Blanche was the most famous for partying. She could drink a surprising amount and still be up at 6 am for early shift, which amazed the others. Soon, however, their social life was over. The fighting in the jungle was becoming more intense, and they were now seeing new casualties every day.

During the second half of January the air raids became more frequent and caused much damage to the city of Singapore. With the enemy closing in, all the nurses from different units were moved with the patients from Johor

Bahru back across the causeway to St Patrick's. The air raids saw them rushing in and out of wards and resorting to bedpans to protect the bedridden patients. As the alarm sounded, Vivian hurried into the ward with a stack of pans.

'Want to make sure we keep the sheets clean, Sister?' the patients laughed. They laughed even more at the reply.

'Matron says you're to put them on your heads.'

The Australian soldiers loved to tease, 'Matron doesn't know much about anatomy, then!'

'We don't have enough tin hats to protect you if bits of the ceiling fall in, now be good and put them on!'

'They'd better be empty then or we'll all be up shit creek!'

Vivian loved the soldiers' humour, it helped everyone feel brave. They were working around the clock as more wounded were admitted. Now they were treating men with multiple problems including head wounds, chest wounds, fractures, burns and severed limbs.

Vivian wrote to her mother often, but like most people at the war front, she downplayed the seriousness of the situation.

*Dear Mum, we're playing at air raids which really is a jolly nuisance. We rush around and put tin hats on our sick boys. They say, 'A fellow would be ill*

*just when the fun starts!’ I don’t suppose it’s any use telling you not to worry, but really, we are quite safe and happy as sandbugs. Jim Austin is much better, and I saw quite a bit of him, before he was moved north into the jungle ...*

One day, Jim Austin returned to see Vivian at the hospital. She was surprised and glad to see him. He told her he had recently come back from heavy fighting in the jungle but was now seconded to headquarters in Singapore. Vivian thought how tired he looked, his boyish, friendly face worn and worried and older, and she wished she could take him for a drink, but because of all the bombing the nurses were now confined to barracks when off duty. Singapore no longer smelled of sandalwood and spice but of dust and smoke, the streets full of rubble from damaged and burning buildings. Shops were shut and ships had started evacuating the civilian population.

In any case, Jim, it seemed, had come to say goodbye.

‘Command thought the jungle was impassable, but it turns out the Japs are pretty good at jungle fighting.

General Yamashita has taken all Malaya. They’re just across the causeway at Johore Baru! The Brits have destroyed the causeway, but the enemy’s cut off our drinking water,

it’s time to go, Viv.’

‘But everyone says “Fortress” Singapore will never fall. There are tons of food supplies stored at the Capitol Cinema. Jim, are you really leaving?’

‘Not *me* — we’ll fight them all the way — but *you’re* leaving, Viv. The nurses are evacuating — I wanted to make sure I had a chance to say goodbye.’

‘The nurses will never agree to leave — we have all these wounded men to care for!’

‘But you must, Viv, while there’s still time. We all heard what the Japs did to the British nurses in Hong Kong, and these are the same regiments! I’m sorry I won’t be seeing you for a while, but you must go! I don’t know when we’ll meet again ...’

They agreed to write, if letters could get through. As they parted Vivian thought how sad it was in war that you always seemed to be saying goodbye to people, people of whom you had grown fond.

## EDIE

SINGAPORE, JANUARY 1942

Eddie loved her grandpa, and she was glad when he told her he was taking her to Singapore. She was leaving friends behind at school, but she was fourteen and life at the convent had begun to feel sheltered and rather dull. Singapore was such an exciting city! She remembered the markets and the stores, the colour and life in the crowded streets.

But as soon as they arrived, she realised this was not the Singapore she had been expecting — no social life, no street markets, only panic and destruction. The air raids were getting worse and so they couldn't go out except for essentials. Many shops were boarded up and lots of buildings had been destroyed. Grandpa had to wait in long queues, trying to get them the official passes to leave on one of the evacuation ships in the harbour. She found it difficult living with Grandma Lillian, her grandfather's

second wife. Edie didn't remember her actual grandma, but she would remind people that Grandma Lillian was in fact her step-grandma. She knew Grandma Lillian was very anxious, but anxiety made her fractious; everything in Edie's life felt suddenly so uncertain.

## VIVIAN

SINGAPORE, 11 FEBRUARY 1942

At St Pat's the nurses were dealing with the aftermath of a particularly bad air raid. One bomb had taken out an entire ward. By great good fortune it was empty at the time, since it had been set aside for fresh casualties expected from the battlefield in the jungle. But now they were short of beds, and even the school chapel was full. As soon as the choking dust had settled, the nurses helped the orderlies sweep up the broken glass and bits of brick.

Despite Jim's prediction, the nurses hadn't been evacuated after all. Command had decided it was 'bad for the men's morale'. The nurses didn't want to leave, anyway. The work was hard — long, exhausting hours nursing soldiers with dreadful wounds, the threat of more air attacks at any moment always on everyone's mind, but they didn't want to leave. Vivian hoped they would never have to go: it was their mission, and besides, she felt it would be

like their mothers leaving them.

So, they continued; continued cutting the filthy, ruined uniforms off the injured men, sponging away the mud and blood and hoping the stockroom wouldn't run out of pyjamas; continued tending wounds and assisting in the surgical ward; continued administering medications, washing and feeding patients; continued sitting at bedsides to cheer them, coax them and read to them. And all the while the explosions and noise of battle grew nearer and nearer until word reached them that the Japanese were only a few streets away.

The group of nurses with Vivian in the barracks were shocked and chastened: so, Singapore could fall after all.

'You know they say the Japs don't take any prisoners? They just shoot or bayonet them.'

'Is it true, though?'

'Some of the stories from our boys are pretty grisly.'

'That's in the jungle, maybe, but not in the city, surely.'

'And surely they wouldn't harm nurses?'

But they had all heard of the case of a group of British nurses in Hong Kong, raped and killed by the invading Japanese forces on Christmas Day. And now those same units were on their doorstep. It was very worrying, but Vivian tried to remain rational.

‘That could have been a disorderly unit. It surely can’t have been sanctioned,’ Vivian reasoned.

But it was hard for some of the others to feel convinced.

‘We have to face it: we really should have left.’

‘I agree. I’m not being windy, just realistic; no-one wants to leave our boys, but when the Japs get here ...’

Vivian quickly intervened. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I imagine if they arrive, we’ll all become prisoners of war. At least we’ll be together.’

Not for the last time, Vivian and the others were comforted by the fact they weren’t alone. Then Matron Drummond arrived with urgent news.

‘Get your things together immediately, we’re being evacuated on the last ships out.’

This was a shock; the moment Vivian had hoped would never come. ‘Leave our patients, Matron?’

‘I’m afraid we must, Sister.’

‘We came to nurse them and now we must abandon them?’

‘We have our orders; only the doctors and hospital orderlies will stay, but not the women. All the nurses

must leave with the remaining civilians. They need us, too! Come along now, chop, chop!’

But in fact, in the end only half the nurses were allowed

to leave immediately. They boarded a British liner, *The Empire Star*, bound for Australia, and the remaining nurses waved them off. The big ship looked solid and safe as it left the dock, but bombs were falling; they prayed the stately liner would glide safely home.

Vivian and her cohort were glad not to leave their charges after all, but they also felt anxious. Then, only a day later, on 12 February 1942, the remainder of the nurses were again told to be ready, and Vivian with sixty-four others quickly packed and assembled. They learned they were to be taken by ambulance to St Andrew’s Cathedral, where casualties had taken sanctuary right up to the altar, and then were to walk the last distance to the wharf, since the roads were impassable because of hundreds of abandoned cars. Colonel Derham from Medical Services felt it was already too late to leave — the Japanese had control of both the air and the seas. But army orders must be obeyed, and as the tearful nurses left for the docks, the men in their care cheered and told them to get to safety.

*What a game lot of lads they are*, thought Vivian. She felt sure that leaving the soldiers to their fate would haunt the nurses all their lives.