

COURAGE BE MY FRIEND

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YEAR LEVEL: Y6–10

ABOUT THE BOOK

An evocative retelling of the story of Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Edith 'Edie' Kenneison.

Sister Bullwinkel enlisted in the Australian Army Nurse Service at the outbreak of World War II and was posted to Singapore. In February 1942, she (and hundreds of others) attempted to escape the advancing Japanese army through Indonesia but was captured and held as a prisoner of war on Bangka Island. Vivian spent the next three years in captivity, working tirelessly to help her fellow prisoners. One of those prisoners was young Edie. Their remarkable friendship would help them survive and became the basis of a lifelong bond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Surrey, England, Jenny Davis OAM lives in Perth with her husband and has had a forty-five-year theatrical career in Australia as an actor, director and playwright. Jenny founded Agelink Theatre thirty-one years ago with an interest in oral histories and WA stories and wrote and directed many plays for the company. In 2018, Agelink Theatre morphed into THEATRE 180 for which Jenny continues to write successful plays, including productions with an original concept combining stage and cinema screen. Jenny's book *Dear Heart* (Allen & Unwin), based on her aunt's WWII letters and diaries, was published in Australia and the United Kingdom. Jenny's work on intergenerational theatre projects with youth and seniors and her contribution to the theatre earned her an Order of Australia Medal, a Centenary Medal and 2016 WA Champion Senior of the Year.

THEMES

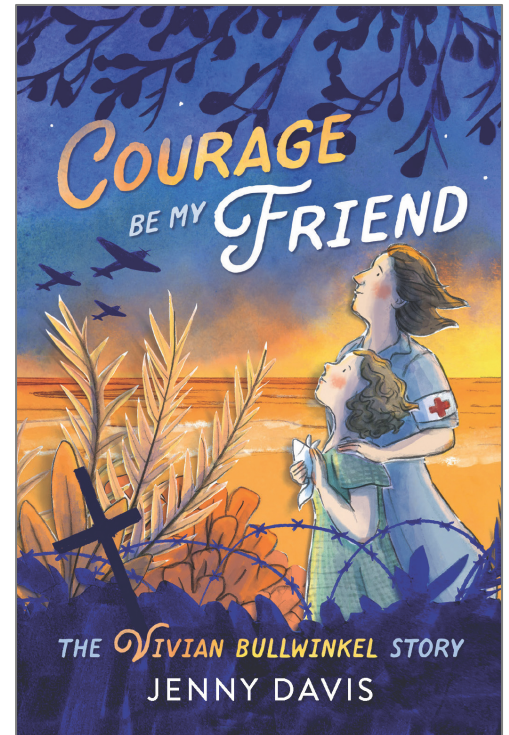
- Friendship
- War (World War II)
- Prison-of-war camps
- Survival and resilience

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y6–10 English
- Y6–10 History
- Y6–10 Geography
- Y6–10 Health and Physical Education

USEFUL WEBSITES

- THEATRE 180: theatre180.com.au
- Virtual War Memorial Australia: vwma.org.au
- Australian War Memorial – The Sinking of SS *Vyner Brooke* and the Banka Island Massacre: awm.gov.au/vyner-brooke-and-banka-island
- Australian War Memorial – Vivian Bullwinkel: awm.gov.au/collection/P10676383



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Before reading

1. In the story, we are introduced to many of the nurses. They came from all over Australia. On a map of Australia, mark where each of the following nurses travelled to Singapore from:
 - a. Vivian Bullwinkel – Burwood, New South Wales
 - b. Blanche Hempsted – Brisbane, Queensland
 - c. Minnie Hodgson – Yealering, Wickepin, Western Australia
 - d. Peggy Everett Farmaner – Claremont, Western Australia
 - e. Bessie Wilmot – Perth, Western Australia
 - f. Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy – Renmark, South Australia
 - g. Alma May Beard – Perth, Western Australia
 - h. Kathleen Neuss – Cremorne, New South Wales
 - i. Iole Harper – Guildford, Western Australia
 - j. Betty Jeffrey – Malvern East, Victoria
 - k. Winnie May Davis – Ulmarra, New South Wales
 - l. Jessie Simons – Nunamara, Tasmania
 - m. Chris Oxley – Charters Towers, Queensland

After reading

1. Create a timeline charting the events in the story.

Discussion questions

1. As Edie gets older and her friendship with Vivian becomes stronger, there is a pivotal moment when she suddenly understands why the nurses work so hard and the importance of a purpose in life. At this point, Edie's outlook on her life changes, and she decides to take on a purpose of her own. The reader is told, **'Edie knew the rain would stop one day'** (p. 153). Discuss the meaning of the quote, then discuss what key events lead up to this moment and the impact it has on Edie's character development for the rest of the book.
2. One of the main themes in the book is friendship. It is these friendships, such as between the nurses themselves, that help the women through this terrible ordeal. Using Vivian and Edie's friendship as an example, discuss how their friendship develops throughout the book and why you think it is important to them. As you do this, consider whether this friendship can be described as 'coming full circle' by the end of the book.
3. In the book, Miss Dryburgh quotes the ancient philosopher Plato: **'Music gives soul to the universe and wings to the mind'** (p. 161). She organises a concert where the women reproduced an orchestra with their voices. Afterwards, the women listening said the **'music saved lives'** (p. 161). What did they mean by this? Can music really save lives? Discuss why the impact of the music was so profound for the women and consider Vivian's reaction to the music to support your answer.

Health and physical education

1. Throughout their time as prisoners in the camps, there is never enough food for the women. Their diet is very limited, often comprising mainly rice, and lacking nutrition. Have a look at the food pyramid and research what makes a healthy diet, particularly for someone Edie's age. What should a healthy diet look like and what might be the consequences of a diet where there is neither enough to eat each day nor enough variety?

Vocabulary work

1. Choose some of the following words to examine:
 - a. perennial – **'... sewage was a perennial problem ...'** (p. 116)
 - b. indomitable – **'... they were lucky to have such an indomitable spirit in charge'** (p. 66).
 - c. skiting – **'I'll bet you they are skiting about it to their friends ...'** (p. 63)
 - d. deputation – **'The nurses were getting up a deputation to order one woman who had some tins of milk to share ...'** (p. 117)
 - e. incensed – **'Blanche was incensed about a different woman ...'** (p. 117)
 - f. fortuitous – **'That seemed strange to the Australians but also fortuitous'** (p. 126).
 - g. pondering – **'Jessie Simons was pondering over hers'** (p. 141).

- h. sadist – '**Captain Seiki, the Sadist!**' (p. 147).
 - i. perplexed – '**... when she saw Vivian, she was perplexed for a moment**' (p. 157).
 - j. deployed – '**The one red lipstick ... had been deployed**' (p. 157).
 - k. revelation – '**The revelation occupied her thoughts ...**' (p. 169)
 - l. incarcerated – '**... now there were seven hundred women and children incarcerated there**' (p. 169–170).
 - m. precarious – '**... their health was very precarious**' (p. 190).
 - n. consternation – '**... Vivian felt consternation**' (p. 192).
2. Ask the students to write their chosen words on an A4 sheet of paper. Then get them to circle:
 - a. In green: words they understand and can use in their writing.
 - b. In blue: words they have heard of but are unsure of their meanings.
 - c. In red: words they have never heard of.
 3. Next, ask the students to use a dictionary to find the meanings of the words they have never heard of and to write the definition next to the word.
 4. Finally, ask them to write a sentence of their own using the word.

Reading comprehension

1. When the women were in the Palembang camp, one of the British Officers informed the Japanese that the women were all military and should be treated as such. Why did he do this and what benefits would this have given the women?
2. How did Edie eventually come to the attention of Vivian?
3. What is a 'kongsì'? This is first spoken about when the women are in the Irenelaan camp. What were the benefits of a kongsì?
4. Edie had a great imagination. This helped her through some tough times in the camps. What did she do to try and make her tasks in the kongsì more bearable?
5. Edie decided that her 'duty' in the camp was to carry out small acts of kindness for Vivian. What tasks did she do to help Vivian, and how did this benefit Edie herself?
6. At the end of 1943, in the men's old camp, the women gave a concert. It says that the red lipstick the nurses had been saving for liberation day had been 'deployed'. This word is usually used for troops who have been moved into position for military battle. Why do you think the author has chosen to use the word here?
7. An important moment in the book is when the women are being moved by boat from the men's camp in Sumatra back to Muntok on Bangka Island. There are no facilities on the boat at all, and Edie seeks the help of a young Japanese guard who gives them his helmet to use as a toilet. This unexpected kind gesture made Edie see the enemy as a human for the first time. '**It struck her all at once that anyone involved in war was to be pitied, the war was bad for everyone**' (p. 168–9). How did this one action change Edie's opinion of the enemy and war in general? What connection did Edie make to her past? Discuss the importance of connecting with others and how the smallest of actions can make the biggest of differences.
8. One of the nurses often uses Australian slang when talking. What is the name of this nurse, and give three examples of sayings she uses and what they mean.

Creative writing

1. In the Irenelaan camp, the women created their own evening entertainment by giving talks about a topic of which they had some knowledge. Imagine you were one of these women, what is a topic you are knowledgeable of and can talk about? Write a 3-minute talk, with palm cards, and present it to the class to 'entertain' them.
2. Even when things were beyond bad and Edie felt everything was '**sad and horrible**', Vivian stated that '**Not everything here is a prisoner ...**' (p. 133) They began to play a game of finding things in the camp that weren't prisoners. As a class or individually, think about 10 things in your life that you are grateful for and write them down in the form of a gratitude tree. They can be tangible things, such as the people around you, or intangible things, such as blue skies or your favourite smell.
3. At the end of the book there are lists of names of the nurses. Select a nurse to write about, researching the available information to help you create a story about who she was, what she did and how she came to be in Singapore. If there is no (or little) information about the nurse selected, use your imagination to write her story.