

COURAGE
BE MY FRIEND

THE *W*IVIAN BULLWINKEL STORY

For my grandchildren
Ashlyn, Oliver, Remy and Saskia
may your lives be always full of friendship
and of hope.

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THE SIVIAN BULLWINKEL STORY

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THEATRE
180



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Courage Be My Friend
is based on the playscript *21 Hearts: Vivian Bullwinkel*
and the Nurses of the Vyners Brooke
written by Jenny Davis
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Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, 1945.

(Photo courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, RC04865)



FOREWORD

I first heard of the friendship of Vivian Bullwinkel and Edith Kenneison thirty years before this book was conceived. I was performing in a production about a nurse and a young civilian in a World War II camp, and Vivian and Edith contacted the theatre company to tell us of the close resemblance of the play to their own story. The strength of their friendship struck me, forged as it was amidst great hardship and danger and enduring for a lifetime. Those experiences they shared created an unbreakable bond. Vivian was a hero to many throughout her life, but I like to think that the mentorship and care she provided to a vulnerable young girl at such a perilous time throws a spotlight on her compassion, and that the resilience Edie learned in the camp was inspired by Vivian.

The story of the nurses' courage and selflessness also speaks to me. Over many years of creating theatre from

oral histories I have heard many wonderful stories of selflessness in times of war and privation. These stories override for me the stories of cruelty and callousness that inevitably dominate tales of conflict. The strength of the human spirit and the courage that comes to us through love and empathy are empowering.

I wish, naturally, that I had asked Vivian and Edith many questions when they were alive. To create a narrative around the facts and numerous accounts requires a little detective work and a considerable amount of imagination. The people in this book all existed and the events all happened, although occasionally not necessarily to the people to whom they are attributed. The conversations between characters and their thoughts are for the most part imagined or inspired by reported conversations. Fortunately, there are several autobiographies and biographies to assist a writer in my situation, and I am indebted to them.

A desire to reproduce a flavour of the way people spoke in 1940s Australia has led me to use some terms in the book that we may find not appropriate today. In particular, the way people tend to speak of their enemies in wartime does not sit comfortably with us now but is authentic to the time and context.

My uncle was in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, and I know of many who went through a process of reappraisal and amnesty after that war. There is a moment in this story where a connection with one individual affects the view Edie has of someone on the opposing side that she had thought so different to herself. To me this is all-important. We learn from good experiences and bad, but mostly we learn from the connections we make with others. The best connections we make are inspiring, and this is a story about great friendships in stressful times that are an inspiration to me.

Jenny Davis
September 2023

PART ONE

WAR

'Mine not to reason why.'

Vivian Bullwinkel

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 2nd/13th 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 2nd/13th 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 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!’

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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 in the army, which came with plenty of social opportunities. Vivian and the others were on early duty next morning, however, so were having a quiet evening.

‘But we are invited to a pool party, Matron, tomorrow afternoon.’

One of the nurses chimed in, ‘I’m in, I have my swimming togs with me, and I can’t think of anything nicer!’

‘We’re also invited to play golf, Minnie,’ added Vivian.

‘Golf can wait,’ said Minnie, ‘I’m going to sit in that nice cool water ’til I look like a prune!’

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. ‘Prune or not, you can come dancing afterwards, Minnie. No doubt you have a line of hopeful, hunky farmers waiting at home, but the world needs to see more of you on the dance floor. Kick up your heels 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-Ogilvy 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 at the Sultan of Johor’s Palace on Boxing Day?’

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 Edie 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 Edie 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, Edie 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. Edie 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. Edie'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!

Edie 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.

DIVIAN

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

Edie 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.

PART TWO
ESCAPE

*'The calmness and courage of my colleagues
was forever an inspiration to me.'*

Vivian Bullwinkel

EDIE

SINGAPORE, 12 FEBRUARY 1942

It was early evening and Edie's grandpa held her hand tightly as they hurried with their bags through the burning rubble of the streets. Singapore was in flames.

Her family had thought Singapore, in British hands, would be a safe place, but now she and her grandparents were struggling to reach the harbour to evacuate. Edie usually wanted so much to be treated as a grown up, but now Grandpa held her hand as if she was a little girl, and she was glad.

Grandpa told her not to look around but to keep her eyes straight ahead. She knew why; she could smell the bodies that lay in the rubble of the bombed buildings. The air was full of dense black smoke that made her eyes smart, and her lungs choke; the rubber and oil stocks near the port had caught on fire. It was hard to see and hard to breathe as they ran. Crowds of people ran with them. These ships

leaving today were their very last chance to escape.

Grandma said, ‘There won’t be enough room on the ships for all these hundreds of people!’

But Grandpa kept calm, he held Edie’s hand, showed their papers at the dock gates and passed through onto the wharf.

Suddenly there was the sound of planes and screaming. Everyone scrambled for shelter, and Edie’s little family found themselves under a covered walkway. Edie closed her eyes at the flash as the bombs fell. When she opened them again, she saw how the explosions had cut a path through the crowd. Big pieces of the wharf had disappeared; chunks of wood and concrete fell on the people like rain — and something else ... bits of clothing perhaps? But they weren’t fluttering as they fell, and a moment later, she knew — not just clothing, but parts of bodies.

Edie could see Grandpa speaking to her, but she couldn’t hear him. She tried not to look as they stepped through the chaos on the quay. There were people lying on the ground, dead people and injured people. There was moaning and shouting and crying, but her ears still rang from the noise of the bombs, and the cries seemed far away. Suddenly there was a woman shouting in her face, but the woman’s voice sounded muffled, Edie couldn’t make out what she

was saying, was she speaking English? Her brain felt made of cotton wool.

Grandpa pulled Edie away, 'We can't help her.' The woman followed them a little way, she was frantic. Edie realised, then, that the woman was looking for her children. All around, beyond the ringing in her ears, babies and small children were crying. Edie was crying, too. She hoped so much that the woman found her family, but she couldn't look back.

They crowded onto a small Chinese ship, the *Giang Be*. With so many people on board, there was scarcely room to sit down. As they set sail there were people still standing on the dock and Edie saw nurses helping the injured people. Huge flames were shooting into the sky. She looked away, out to sea, but even after they were on the ocean, the horizon blue and calm, and her ears normal, with only the ship's engines thrumming safely, even then she couldn't get the sight and smell of the docks out of her mind.

'Carnage,' said Grandpa, 'Total carnage.'

DIVIAN

SINGAPORE, 12 FEBRUARY 1942

Without waiting for a command, the nurses on the wharf ran to help the injured, even as the dust from the fallen bombs was still settling. Shattered suitcases spilled garments, which were torn up to make bandages to tie off severed limbs and dress gaping wounds.

Eventually the nurses boarded a tugboat for the last small ship in the harbour. Some women left on the dock shouted insults — why should the nurses go before them? Families who had left it too late to leave and now had no passes, were white faced and calling out to them to help, their children wailing.

‘Find room for us! Don’t leave us here! Please!’

Matron Drummond looked at the tear-streaked faces of her nurses.

‘There are lots of women and children already on board,

many wounded, and with only us to care for them; our work continues!’

As the tug approached the ship, the name could be seen on the prow: SS *Vyner Brooke*. So, they would all get to know this British ship, after all, but not in any way they had imagined. Vivian heard that they were heading for Ceylon. It felt a long way from Australia, but many British troops were stationed there.

As the *Vyner Brooke* moved out of the harbour, some of the nurses started to sing ‘Waltzing Matilda’, but it died out quickly. The ship had to navigate through mines, laid in the sea to repel invaders. Jimmy Miller, the kindly engineer that Vivian had met on her evening on the *Vyner Brooke* before the war, came to find her. He could see morale was at a low point and told the nurses, ‘I’ve got some booze on board for off duty.’ Matron wasn’t at all sure they would ever be ‘off duty’.

‘A major part of our job,’ she replied, ‘is to maintain proper discipline and good morale.’

Vivian knew they would have their job cut out with two hundred people crowded on board a small ship built to carry sixty. But Matron had a plan.

‘We’ll divide the ship into sections and each be responsible for a group,’ she instructed. ‘There are very few

supplies on board — we will have to pool the food we have brought and ration it out or there won't be enough to feed everyone properly for the journey. Captain Borton says that we'll travel by night and moor at an island during the day to avoid detection. It will be hot, and people will be fractious, we must do our best to keep everyone calm.'

The nurses were all thinking the same thing. 'What if we're attacked?'

Matron was calm, but definite. 'The ship is clearly marked with the Red Cross. It's an international symbol, so I hope they leave us alone. But if we *are* under attack, we see to the wounded; and if we're obliged to abandon ship, then we must be the last to go. Evacuate civilians first. Check all the decks to make sure everyone is gone and then wait for my order to leave.'

As the nurses made up field dressings and pinned syringes of morphine inside their pockets, Vivian reflected that a nurse's training not only inspired others to look to them for leadership, but the nurses themselves took on that responsibility the moment they donned their uniforms.

Distributing the life vests, they reminded passengers to hold the vests down if they had to jump into the water, else they could ride up and break their necks. Vivian just hoped they worked — she had never learned to swim.

‘Don’t worry, Bully. If we do have to go into the water, I’ll look after you,’ Bessie assured her.

‘What about sharks?’ someone asked. A chill ran through the nurses, but they tried to dismiss it.

‘There’d be lots of us in the water — if we all kick at once we can keep them at bay.’

Blanche offered to let loose with some ‘blue’ language at them. That was her ‘expertise’. Blanche could always be counted on to lighten a dark moment.

DIVIAN

BANGKA STRAIT, 14 FEBRUARY 1942

As day dawned, the *Vyner Brooke* was entering the Bangka Strait, the waters separating Bangka Island from Sumatra. This was the quickest route but it was also dangerous. In the past few weeks, the Bangka Strait had become known as 'Bomb Alley'.

During the first night onboard, no-one had managed to sleep much as Captain Borton steered the ship through the minefield and distant sounds of battle disturbed their dreams; but 13 February had brought a bright and beautiful day of sunshine, blue sky, sparkling sea and little jewel green islands. It had been difficult then to think of a war raging not so very far away, when all that could be heard were waves, wind and seabirds, and all that night had been relatively peaceful.

And so, on this morning, 14 February, the nurses had become used to the motion of the ship and the background

hum of the engines — when suddenly the engines stopped. The word went around to stay quiet; the captain had spotted an enemy plane. Everyone waited breathlessly. Would the aircraft fly on? But no, they had been seen! On deck everyone ducked as the plane nosedived and fired at the ship — flying over so close it almost hit the mast! No-one was hurt, but the lifeboats were badly damaged. Captain Borton gave the order to make for land as soon as possible. But now the enemy knew their position, and soon they were back.

This time there were several bombers. And this time, their aim was good.

Deafened by the blasts, the nurses moved to help the injured — some even of their own — Clarice Halligan, Rosetta Wight, Kathleen Neuss and Florence Casson were badly wounded in the legs and hip by shrapnel and were helped down rope ladders into the lifeboats along with the other wounded and the civilians: women and children first. Wilma picked out pieces of shattered glass from cuts in her legs but could still carry on.

The damage to many of the lifeboats meant they were taking in sea water and the passengers needed something to bail the water out with if they were to stay afloat. Vivian handed the occupants of one lifeboat her tin hat, then got

back to searching for stragglers. Below deck, injured had to be helped up the stairs, and Vivian used her morphine phial on a man with a dreadful stomach wound so that she could drag him up on deck. Meanwhile, the ship was listing badly. Whatever their inner turmoil, the nurses stayed outwardly calm; they had a role to play. Vivian felt it was like a bad dream.

When Matron's order came, *'Abandon ship!'*, the *Vyner Brooke* was leaning so much to one side that the women found themselves sliding down to the deck rail as they kicked off their shoes. The ship was sinking fast. It was now or never: they jumped ...

Suddenly the noise was far away. Vivian sank down and down into the dim green, and for a moment she was paralysed by the shock. Under water was a different world, a mysterious world without planes and terror. She thought, *'Maybe I should just give in ... be done with it all ...'* But then she kicked, and the life vest thrust her up to the surface.

Dazed by a sudden burst of noise and dazzled by light, bobbing awkwardly in her flotation device, she saw oil from the ship was coating the water and those in it. People clung to life rafts or whatever object they could find. Above, the Japanese planes circled and then sped down towards them, machine guns at the ready. Vivian closed her eyes and waited

as the plane engines roared and the guns chattered ...

When they had passed, she could scarcely believe she hadn't been killed. The smell of oil, the taste of salt, the chafing of the life vest against her skin ... these told her she was alive ... but many had died in the water around her. She knew she couldn't think about that now, her job was to paddle furiously to get away from the sinking ship. Screams across the water as the oil caught fire spurred her on, until she was lucky enough to grab a rope around the side of an overturned lifeboat. She clung to it, along with others, their oil blackened heads bobbing in the water beside her. Then suddenly she heard a familiar voice: it was Jimmy Miller, the engineer.

'Vivian, Vivian Bullwinkel, is that you? Thank God you're safe, keep hanging on, the current will take us.'

'Or the sharks?'

'There won't be sharks around, not with all those bombs falling in the sea. There goes the ship ...'

It was less than half an hour since the attack had begun, and so much had happened in that short time. With a sound like a great groan, the *Vyner Brooke* rolled over, crushing a packed lifeboat that, trapped by tangled ropes, was still held fast to its side.

Never had Vivian felt more helpless. She could only

watch, aghast, as the bodies of tiny babies, too small for life vests, floated briefly among the debris before disappearing into the depths, while the bodies of adults in their life vests drifted silently away ...

EDIE

BANGKA STRAIT, 13 FEBRUARY 1942

She didn't remember very much about the night the *Giang Be* sank, or the days after; only bits and pieces. She did remember the attacks by planes during the day and that some people were injured, and some died, and then the two Japanese ships — destroyers — that appeared in the evening. At first, the *Giang Be* crew thought they would be boarded by the Japanese, but for many hours the two big destroyers just trained their searchlights on the little ship. The first panic subsided; the passengers waited, but nothing happened. It was late at night when Grandpa woke Edie to tell her that Captain Lancaster had received a message from the destroyers and that everyone must abandon ship!

After that it was all a blur as the passengers scrambled for the lifeboats. Edie and her grandparents were well back in the crowd and so didn't see the fate of the first two boats that were lowered, but they heard the screams. Edie was

told later that the air attacks had damaged the boats — one sank when it reached the water, and the other had broken ropes and fell as it was lowered, spilling the people into the black ocean.

At the time Edie felt in a daze, clinging tightly to Grandpa's hand. Grandma Lillian told her to keep holding Grandpa's hand and not let go, but she didn't need telling. Grandpa was strong, she felt safe with him. All she remembered then was the people pushing and shoving, she felt small in the crowd and struggled to keep on her feet. Grandpa kept her going and they were almost at the rail, when suddenly someone banged into Edie sharply and she stumbled and fell. People surged around her, and she was forced to let go – suddenly Grandpa was no longer there. Edie tried to crawl through the crowd to find him. There was loud screaming. The screaming went on and on. A man picked Edie up and threw her into the water. The next thing she knew she was in a lifeboat. The screaming continued, loud in her ears, '*Grandpa!*' — and she realised it was her own voice.

The lifeboat was caught in a strong current. All Edie remembered afterwards was the shelling that set fire to the *Giang Be* lighting up the dark sky, and against that glow, black figures jumping from the ship into the sea.

Grandma Lillian and Edie were in the crowded lifeboat for two days. Someone gave her a biscuit to eat, but it was hard to swallow without a sip of water. The two Japanese destroyers sailed away without trying to help anyone. Edie was in a complete daze as the hours passed. Their lifeboat came ashore near a lighthouse on an island. One thought ran continually through Edie's mind, *I let go of his hand ... I should never have let go of his hand.*

Grandpa wasn't in the lifeboat. She never saw him again.

VIVIAN

RADJI BEACH, BANGKA ISLAND, 16 FEBRUARY 1942

There is a beach ...

A tropical island beach of warm sand, blue water and pink morning glory trailing decoratively over the rocks.

This is Radji Beach on Bangka Island, Indonesia. It is a place where you might dive to see many hued corals and brilliantly coloured fish. A place you might linger to dream. But this is not that time ...

Dozens of bodies washed up on that island. Survivors from the *Vyner Brooke* were many, many hours in the water. For a little while there had been a sense of relief for Vivian at not having drowned, of the peace away from the bombs and guns, the sun on her face and the cool water to float in. However, it became clear that the strong current was intent on taking the upturned lifeboat past Bangka Island and out

to sea. Long and exhausting hours ensued as she and the others clinging to the waterlogged boat struggled to push and kick it to the shore.

Above them the night sky stretched large, lit with friendly stars. Vivian had felt like a speck on this vast ocean in this vast universe, but the starlight comforted her and took her thoughts away from the mysterious depths of the ocean beneath. Her legs ached from kicking as she pushed the raft, and her hands were painfully puffy and cold. She was wondering how long she could continue when Jimmy Miller said, 'There's a light!'

It appeared to be a bonfire. The sight immensely cheered Vivian and the others as they steered the boat in that direction. Many hours later, as day dawned, the exhausted swimmers at last found themselves in the shallows; they stumbled onto the beach and collapsed.

The fire on Radji Beach had been lit by survivors of a raft from *Vyner Brooke* carrying Matron Drummond. The bonfire attracted others from the shipwreck and eventually over one hundred people were assembled, including a few of the crew of the *Vyner Brooke* and their First Officer, Bill Sedgeman, around forty British servicemen, many of them wounded, some civilian men, women and children and twenty-two of the nurses. All assembled on the sand

surrounded by blue waters and forests with red and yellow peacock flowers.

So, now they were castaways on a tropical island beach. If anyone had once thought the idea of being a castaway romantic, they certainly felt otherwise now. They had nothing, not even shoes, only the clothes they were wearing when the ship went down. The indefatigable Matron rallied the nurses and soon they were busy caring for women and children; and nursing the wounded among the British men.

Everyone was feeling the heat and the sandfly bites. Vivian and the others were grateful for Matron Drummond's abilities to organise and inspire. The nurses' first task was to carry fresh water from a stream in the jungle and gauge the neediest cases. Without any medication for the wounded, it was not going to be easy.

Everyone was in shock, and Vivian knew that it helped to have a job to do. Helped them to keep going, helped them to focus on the moment in hand, when they were naturally grieving for their lost friends and colleagues. She wondered if there were villagers nearby who could help them. But Matron reported, 'There's a village, but the headman won't help us. Says we must surrender to the Japs. He's scared of them, of course. One can't blame him: he must protect his villagers from reprisals.'

‘The Japs are in control here, then,’ Vivian said. ‘And we have no hope of rescue!’

‘And no food,’ Bessie had added, ‘so, it looks like surrender. The only other option is to go back into the water with whatever still floats and see where the tides take us!’

Even for a strong swimmer like Bessie that was not an attractive proposition. Everyone felt they’d had more than enough of the ocean, and many were too weak or too sick. Very few, if any, would make it.

By the next morning it had been decided that the British soldiers, with First Officer Bill Sedgeman, would find the Japanese camp at Muntok and surrender, then bring the Japanese back to capture the rest of the party.

The nurses elected to stay and look after those soldiers who were too badly injured to make the journey.

After the British soldiers had left, the civilians decided they would also make the walk into Muntok. They had no food, and the children were already so hungry: the sooner they were captured, the sooner they could be fed. Engineer Jimmy Miller chose to stay with the nurses and help.

With most of the beach party gone, those remaining listened until the voices receded and the quiet of the surrounding jungle engulfed them.

How strange it felt, waiting for their captors. They moved the wounded into the shade under the trees and tried not to think of a life as prisoners. The Japanese would now have a lot of mouths to feed. Hopefully they would have vehicles to get the wounded to hospital.

Thoughts turned to family back home in Australia. Some of the nurses had brothers away at the war. Both Minnie and Bessie had lost brothers some years before to drowning accidents. Both had thought a good deal about their brothers while they were in the water. How difficult it must have been for parents to see their daughters also go overseas. But as Elaine said, 'When duty calls you just rise to the challenge. My family have long served in the army: my father was a major.'

'And decorated!'

'Yes, he was. Thanks, Viv. And I know he was proud when I said I was joining the Australian Army Nursing Service. It's particularly hard on our mothers, though ...'

Bessie cut in, 'I'll bet you they're skiting about it to their friends, nonetheless, and good on 'em!'

Bessie's mother had died when she was young and her father had left the family, but she had a wonderful aunt and a wonderful stepmother, and she knew they would be cheering her on from afar.

‘I hope we can somehow let them know what’s happened,’ said Vivian. ‘If they don’t hear from us, it will be dreadful for them not knowing where we are. I really want to tell my mother that even battered by the waves, we’ve still survived this far ... some of us, at least.’

The hours passed and the sun moved across the sky. Minnie was reminiscing about Western Australia with Alma Beard, who came from Toodyay in the Avon Valley.

‘The harvest will all be in and graded by now. I can almost smell the burnt stubble. My folks will be sitting on the verandah soon with the dogs, Dad still dusty in his hat and boots, watching the sunset.’

Alma could picture it exactly. ‘They could be reading your last letter home, Minnie.’

‘Probably imagining me in the hospital rolling bandages! Wish we had some clean bandages now.’

Kathleen Neuss from Ballarat tried to ignore the pain of her shrapnel wounds by recalling the enjoyable journey to Singapore when she travelled there a year ago on the ocean liner, *The Queen Mary*. In peacetime it had been a luxurious ship. For carrying troops, the furniture had been removed and the ballroom made into a hospital.

‘But,’ Kathleen said, ‘they’d kept all the wood panelling on the walls — and the chandeliers. And I loved being up

on deck in the wind, watching the waves below. I'd never been on a big ship before. It was very exciting. Glad I got to see it.'

The nurses were endeavouring to keep conversation as light as possible, to keep up their spirits and feel hopeful. After all, they had survived a dreadful ordeal. There were friends and colleagues to mourn, but that must wait. Those that were able, encouraged by Matron Drummond, attempted to boost the group's morale. However, try as they might to distract themselves, the thought of what might come next kept returning. The sun shone and the sea sparkled, but the tension grew as they waited. Peggy was trying to stay confident.

'I know they say the Japs don't take prisoners, but there are so many of us. They surely can't wipe out hundreds of us!'

Others tried to pick up her cue,

'Yes, they're the occupiers now, so they must be making prison camps.'

'And think of all the Dutch and British civilians that couldn't get away. They must be put somewhere!'

'Surely the Japs also have families at home? They'd want *them* to be treated properly ...'

It wasn't easy, however, for everyone to stay positive.

‘It’s a different culture, though, they don’t think we should let ourselves be taken prisoner — it’s not honourable in their eyes.’

‘But we aren’t combatants!’ Peggy was determined to be hopeful.

‘All the same, we’re wearing uniforms.’

‘But with Red Cross armbands! Everyone all over the world respects the Red Cross, they can’t just ignore it!’

‘They did on the ship.’

Peggy was silent.

‘And these troops were the ones in Hong Kong, remember. They’ve been fighting together for a long time and seen and done awful things. War can brutalise soldiers.’

Matron Drummond knew she must step in.

‘Panic is the most infectious disease I’ve ever seen, and I don’t want it on my watch! I think the Japs will need nurses in their prison camps and so we can go on doing good work. Conquering fear, that’s the beginning of wisdom. You’re all stronger than you think. Remember all the strong women in your lives, girls. They made *you* strong. Whatever is ahead, we can face it together.’

They were all grateful to Matron. Vivian had known her the longest; she knew that they were lucky to have such an indomitable spirit in charge. She spoke to her quietly.

‘If for some reason I don’t get home, Matron, I hope you might visit my mother — tell her what good company I was in and that we kept up our spirits.’

And as the jungle birds called and the mosquitoes danced, they saw a movement in the undergrowth. A party of twenty Japanese soldiers and First Officer Bill Sedgeman came out of the forest onto the beach. The women scrambled to their feet. Jimmy Miller stood by the wounded British men sitting and lying on the ground. There was a silence. A young Japanese officer surveyed the scene.

Suddenly he gave a sharp order, at which the soldiers loaded their rifles and fixed their bayonets. With a gasp the nurses huddled together, raising their hands in surrender. Were the bayonets for them? The British officer protested, but to no avail as the soldiers used their bayonets to move the nurses away from the men. Vivian was struck with fear for the British lads as the Japanese, shouting, forced them roughly to their feet, pushing or dragging them further down the beach behind boulders around the headland, along with Jimmy Miller and Bill Sedgeman. Left under guards with rifles, the nurses could only watch as those men that could walk went quietly with their heads bowed. Jimmy Miller turned to give Vivian a last boyish smile before he was out of sight.

The nurses stood, completely silent, trying not to tremble. They knew their uniforms called for dignity. Perhaps, thought Vivian, their greatest fear was of showing fear.

The young Japanese officer, Captain Masaru, remained with them; Vivian thought he looked bored, impatient even, wanting to get it over with.

They waited, tense, silent, sick to their stomachs. A faint breeze, a birdcall, nothing to indicate a war zone, and still they waited.

Suddenly a volley of rifle shots filled the air. The nurses clutched at each other in shock. Then, at last, the Japanese soldiers returned. They strolled back along the beach, talking and laughing, wiping their bayonets.

‘They’ve murdered them all!’ someone gasped.

Vivian fought back her tears. ‘Goodbye, Jimmy Miller.’

‘They aren’t taking prisoners.’

In that moment, Vivian knew they could expect the worst. There would be no respect for their uniforms and Red Cross armbands, no regard for their dignity. These were the troops that had violated and murdered the nurses in Hong Kong. Vivian was a courageous young woman, she had left her homeland behind, nursed dreadful wounds and lived through bombing and near drowning, but here

on this beach the little group of women were completely alone and unprotected. Paralysed by fear and consumed with grief for the friends they had just lost, they watched the troop's approach.

Someone said, was it Matron? 'Breathe, just keep breathing', and Vivian realised that she had been holding her breath. Someone else said, 'Don't scream, they aren't worth it.' The Japanese grabbed them roughly.

Vivian tried to focus on the blue sky above their assailants' heads, a sky blue as that of her homeland. She was angry and she was afraid, but she would not show it. Her mind was her own to control. At home the world would go on, the sky would still be blue, there would still be love and laughter and tea in the shade of the golden wattle tree. *'It's true,' she thought, 'war can brutalise minds, but not mine, I won't let it.'*

If there was noise, Vivian didn't hear it. The world came back into focus, and heavy limbed with shock, the dishevelled nurses got to their feet and supported their own wounded, as the Japanese soldiers prodded all the women with their bayonets and forced them into a line across the beach facing the sea. A machine gun was readied behind them.

There stood the nurses with the water lapping softly at

their feet. They knew what was expected of them. They may have trembled but were determined to act bravely. Someone softly recited a prayer.

Vivian thought, *I'm so sorry, Mother, that you'll never know what happened to me.*

There was silence as the women stepped forward and began entering the water, but their suddenly sharpened senses were mostly aware of the beautiful surrounding scene: the gentle breeze lifting the leaves, a hibiscus flower floating yellow on the water, the sun on closed eyelids. What madness to die far from home in this lovely place. A second to look at each other, to exchange glances and reassurances.

We are not alone.

Don't look back, be brave.

There is only us and this gentle breeze on this beautiful beach.

Vivian thought of her dead father. She still felt his loss, but maybe now they would meet again. Suddenly at peace, she turned to smile at the others, who returned her smile, then slowly they started wading.

Matron said, 'Chin up, girls, I'm proud of you and I love you all.'

Vivian pushed against the water until almost knee deep.

The machine gun opened fire.

Long after the screeching of the startled birds had faded, after the Japanese soldiers had left, Vivian lay still in the water, rolling gently with the waves, her head to one side as she vomited swallowed seawater. So, this was how it felt to be shot, the white-hot pain searing the flesh of her lower back, the water turning crimson. But this was not how it felt to die. Instead, she was alive, breathing, floating in shallow water, never moving, listening for voices. For a long while she floated, letting the saltwater cleanse and sanitise her wound. Eventually the tide washed her onto the beach, where she lay, not daring to look up, until the silence emboldened her to raise her head. She saw the bodies in the water around her and on the shore. She crawled up the beach into the shade of the trees and collapsed.

EDIE

MUNTOK CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, FEBRUARY 1942

When she first arrived in the temporary internment camp at Muntok, Edie would dream of the ship sinking. In her dream she would think, *I'll wake up in the morning and it will just have been a nightmare.*

But when she awoke, she would remember all over again the extraordinary fact that she was a prisoner.

After their lifeboat had landed on shore, the passengers had been immediately captured and kept first in a pigsty and then with many others in the local cinema. When they were brought to the temporary camp a few days later, they found a group of huts in a compound that had housed mine workers before the war. Grandma Lillian and Edie were put together with a lot of other women and little children. It was very crowded, so they slept on a mat on the floor. At night Edie would listen to the women around her crying. Edie felt she was crying inside, but outwardly she

was numb, she couldn't make sense of it all, everything had happened so quickly. She just wanted Grandpa to come and tell her that all would be well.

There were British soldiers in the camp, too. A couple of cooks with the British army prepared the meals from the meagre rations given to them by the Japanese. The men all waited in one line for food. The women, including some Dutch nuns and some Australian nurses, waited in another. Edie knew she should eat but was still in shock, she moved with leaden limbs and scarcely spoke.

VIVIAN

BANGKA ISLAND, 25 FEBRUARY 1942

When Vivian had awoken in the jungle on the afternoon of 14 February, her first thought had been her parched throat and her need for water. But as she raised her head, she heard a voice. Through the foliage she saw a line of men passing, quite close! She recognised them as the Japanese soldiers on the beach and she lay still, heart pounding so loudly she thought the soldiers must hear it. What if she had tried to get up a moment sooner?

Vivian had to remain thirsty for a long time, listening to the noises of the insects around her, until she could be certain she was quite alone. When she finally stood up, she stumbled through the trees until she came to a small stream. It was then that she had been surprised by an English voice.

‘Where have you been, Nurse?’

Astonishingly, a young British soldier, Private Patrick

Kinsley, had survived the bayonet attack. He told her that a couple of men had tried to escape into the water. The rifle shots the nurses had heard were the Japanese killing the escapees. The remaining men had all been bayoneted several times and left for dead. Private Kinsley had only received two wounds, and had been surprised to find himself still breathing, although with difficulty, since one bayonet thrust had pierced a lung. Vivian had helped him as best she could: bathing his wounds and bandaging him with dressings she made from coconut fibre. But for all her care over the days since she had found him, there was one thing she couldn't help with.

'How's the pain, Private Kinsley?' Vivian asked him.

'Still pretty rough, Sister. How long have we been hiding in the jungle now?'

'Eleven days.'

'Thank you for looking after me. Especially when you're wounded yourself.'

'I'm tall. The bullet went through my hip, no organs to meet on the way. I suppose I've been fortunate.'

'Lucky for me we found each other. I couldn't have made it this far without you.'

'Lucky for me, too. I think I'd have gone mad on my own. I'm sorry I can't help the pain.'

‘Bloody Japs! You’d think bombing my arm half off would be enough for them, without the bayonet through my guts.’

‘Seems like they couldn’t finish either of us off properly.’

‘Shooting women and bayoneting men on stretchers: not exactly heroic work.’

Private Kinsley was growing weaker. ‘It’s funny, but you never consider dying far from home.’

Vivian had been thinking the same. ‘Strange how things turn out. My brother went to England to fight, and you’re *from* England and you end up fighting over *here*.’

‘Seems war scatters us all over the globe.’

Vivian thought of her brother in the RAF, fighting in a different but equally dangerous situation.

‘If John gets shot down, he might be hiding like us, only somewhere in Europe.’

‘Trying to keep warm instead of fighting off mosquitoes.’

‘Pat, I’ve been thinking, can you walk if you lean on me?’

‘You think we should move? I’ll manage it, Sister.’

‘The thing is, I can’t get any more food from the village women, it’s too dangerous for them. I know we agreed not to surrender, but we’ll die here unless we do.’

Private Kinsley was silent. Vivian knew it was a dreadful choice to have to make.

‘Of course, they don’t like taking prisoners, so we could die either way.’

‘I reckon I’m done for anyway, Sister.’

Now it was Vivian’s turn to be silent, so Private Kinsley spoke again.

‘Isn’t that so?’

Vivian spoke gently. ‘It’s not good, Pat. The wounds are infected, that’s why you have a fever.’

‘I don’t want to die alone.’ After a short while he added, ‘You’re right about surrender. Will you take me with you, Sister?’

‘Tomorrow, then, we’ll follow the path out of the village tomorrow to Muntok and find the Jap camp.’

Again, Private Kinsley didn’t answer.

‘Pat?’

‘Actually, Sister, it’s my birthday tomorrow.’

Vivian was too much overcome to speak. Private Kinsley went on,

‘I’d like to have a last day of freedom for my birthday.’

Vivian rallied. It was best to remain as cheerful as possible, she reasoned, knowing that if you faked hope then often real hope would follow.

‘Of course. The day after, we’ll go the day after. We’ll find you a strong stick to help with walking. And there’s a tiny

bit of rice left — we can make a rice birthday cake!’

‘Just what I wanted!’

‘And then we’ll clean up a bit. Don’t want them to know we were on the beach and escaped being killed the first time.’

‘What will you do about the bullet hole in your dress?’

Vivian had been combing wreckage on the beach for any useful washed-up objects and had found a water bottle still on its strap. It was a valuable receptacle but now had another useful function.

‘I’ll wear the bottle over it. We’ll meet them with our heads held high.’

‘And if it comes to the worst,’ said Private Kinsley, ‘perhaps they’ll do a better job of it this time!’

VIVIAN

MUNTOK CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, MARCH 1942

When Sister Vivian Bullwinkel limped under guard into the temporary holding camp at Muntok, she saw a row of huts. For a moment she thought that the women running towards her were local women in sarongs and conical straw hats to keep out the sun.

Then someone called out, ‘Vivian, Vivian Bullwinkel! Is that really you?’

Vivian was surprised; after two weeks hiding in the jungle and a long walk supporting Private Kinsley until they were picked up by a Japanese army vehicle, and after interrogation by Japanese officers as Kinsley was taken away to join the British prisoners, all these women surrounding her felt overwhelming. Someone knew her?

‘Bully! You’re alive!’

Now she started to recognise faces and voices — other army nurses she knew were here in the camp. Wilma

Oram, Blanche Hempstead and others crowded around to greet her.

‘Where have you been all this time?’

‘How did you survive?’

‘Have you seen the others?’

‘Where’s Matron Drummond? Bully, have you seen her?’

‘Yes, what happened to Matron?’

The questions trailed off as Vivian remained silent.

Then a quiet voice asked, ‘Bully, where are the others?’

And a quiet answer: ‘They’re all dead.’

PART THREE

CAPTIVITY

*'Don't walk looking down at the ground,
look up to the stars.'*

Vivian Bullwinkel

EDIE

MUNTOK CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, MARCH 1942

Edie was sitting at the gate when the guards brought in the tall Australian nurse. Edie sat every evening by the gate. Every day hungry, every day afraid of the guards, every day hoping Grandpa would walk through the gate, that she hadn't lost him when the ship went down. She didn't want to be with Grandma Lillian. It seemed that the women in the camp were all feeling either angry or sad. Grandma Lillian was one of the angry ones. She blamed Edie for letting go of Grandpa's hands. Edie just felt immensely sad.

But when she set eyes on the tall nurse, something changed. For some reason she couldn't explain she felt more hopeful. The tall nurse looked tired and a bit bewildered, her hair was matted and her uniform stained, but she also looked like a person who was determined. She was taller than the guards and stood very erect.

The other nurses were surprised to see her and ran to

greet her. While they were talking, they showed her the sarongs and sandals the local women had given them, and the tall nurse smiled. She had a wide smile and Edie liked the way it made her blue, blue eyes crinkle at the corners. Her feet were bloody and wrapped in tattered fig leaves, so Edie knew she must have been glad to see the sandals. The nurses called her 'Bully'; Edie thought it a very strange name. Then the tall nurse told them something that shocked them. There were no smiles now.

Edie followed the group and sat under the steps of the house that was the nurses' quarters, so that she could listen to their conversation. They asked Bully a lot of questions about other women and the answers made them all very unhappy. Edie gathered some nurses had died on a beach. They all agreed that Bully must never tell anyone else in the camp about those who died that day. They said, 'Not a word, until we get out of here.'

The other nurses believed that if the guards ever found out that Bully had witnessed the killing, they'd kill her, too. They said, 'It's a war crime, Bully.'

Edie didn't know the full story until much later, but even before that time she knew she should not tell Grandma or the other women in the camp about it. She wanted 'her nurse' to be safe.

Bully said, 'I'll never, ever forget them. I'll tell the world one day, after the war.'

The nurses told Bully they were going to be badly needed in the camp, because of the jungle fever and dysentery among the civilians. Edie knew they were speaking of the families like hers. Some were already sick.

'They give us bugger all medicines. A bit of quinine, but that'll soon be bloody well gone with all these malaria cases!' Blanche declared.

'I mean, here we are, trying out local remedies from plants — feel like a bleedin' witch doctor sometimes.'

Grandma would have been cross if she'd heard swearing, but everyone else laughed and Edie did, too, under the steps.

Bully was distressed when they told her there were thirty-two nurses in the camp. 'But sixty-five of us left Singapore on the *Vyner Brooke*!'

So, these were the nurses who had been on the dock when Edie and her grandparents had sailed from Singapore.

'Twenty-one died on the beach ... so twelve are missing.'

Edie knew what that meant, and she knew what the reply would be.

'Lost at sea.'

VIVIAN

MUNTOK CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, MARCH 1942

Life as a prisoner for Vivian began at the unsanitary hut camp at Muntok. After the Radji Beach massacre, Vivian had just wanted to be with her friends, then she felt her problems would be over. Now she wasn't so sure. The other nurses were very shocked about the massacre, but it was Vivian's turn to be shocked about the camp that the rest of them had been living in for a couple of weeks.

Life in the camp was very difficult with *'bloody smelly'* open sewage drains and very little food – mostly a meagre amount of rice and nothing to flavour it except the odd red chilli. They were given no utensils, and as shipwreck survivors they owned absolutely nothing.

One of the nurses, Iole Harper from Guildford, near Perth, had been able to engage with some local women through the wire fence around the camp, and they had given them the sarongs. This meant they could keep their

battered and stained uniforms folded away, with a plan to wear them only for special occasions and on the day of their liberation, whenever that might be.

They tried to keep themselves and the camp as clean as they could, but with just one tap for water there was a great deal of time spent queuing. Betty Jeffreys, from East Malvern in Victoria, discovered a pile of trousers in one of the huts. The nurses used a pair of nail scissors someone still had in their possession to fashion shorts and sun tops for work clothes.

Despite this discovery, Betty was feeling exasperated. 'Our captors give us nothing at all. Zilch! Not even a bowl to eat your rice from or soap to wash with. Thank goodness Blanche is good at rummaging around.'

'That's me! The scrounger!'

'You do have a knack for finding things, Blanche.'

Vivian had to admire Blanche, she wasn't only funny, she was resourceful.

'I found an old milk tin. That serves as our plate. And a rusty old shoehorn — took some cleaning but that's now our spoon! Luxury! But wait for it, wait for it, the pièce de resistance — voilà: a toothbrush!'

Vivian supposed it was once a wooden toothbrush, but it was very old and mangy looking.

‘Where did you find that?’

‘In a drain. Remarkable what bleedin’ treasures people throw away! We all share it; just hoping it lasts us out. Mind you, our teeth might fall out faster than the bloody bristles!’

The women laughed, but they were very dispirited by the news that Matron Drummond had died. They had felt sure if Matron turned up everything would somehow be alright. And they were all mourning the loss of their many friends.

Wilma Oram was recovering from the injuries she received during the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*. She was devastated that her dear friend, Mona Wilton, had been lost at sea, and determined that no other nurse must die. Mona took Vivian under her wing, caring for her bullet wound, sleeping next to her to share a mosquito net she had acquired and giving some of her own food ration to help build up Vivian’s strength.

*

A week later Vivian’s wound was healing well; she felt stronger. A British soldier came to find her and took her to the makeshift hospital the British army had set up in their part of the Japanese camp. The army doctor told her that a patient had been asking for her.

Private Kinsley was clearly dying. He spoke in a raspy voice, 'Sister!'

'Yes, Pat, I'm here.'

'Thank you, Sister ... for everything.'

'We did it together.'

'You're so strong, I wanted to be like you. You kept me going, Sister.'

Vivian thought of how they had found each other at a time when they believed they would die alone in a hostile world. No-one should have to do that.

'Pat, I want you to know that I admire you very much, and I feel a great pride in having had you as a companion.'

'I'm glad, too.' He was coughing. 'I just wanted to say goodbye; you'd better go now, Sister ...'

'I'll stay with you a little while longer, Pat.'

Private Kinsley lost consciousness. Vivian held his hand and listened to his rasping breath. Ten minutes later, he was dead.

EDIE

MUNTOK CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, MARCH 1942

At three in the morning the next day, everyone in the camp was woken by the guards and given an hour to be ready, without any food, for the walk to the Muntok docks. There they boarded a dingy little freighter, which took them across the strait to Sumatra and then through the jungle up the Musi River. They were going to Palembang.

The journey through the jungle was hot and humid; the sun burned them and then a torrential downpour soaked them to the skin. When the sun appeared again, Edie watched steam rising from their sodden clothes. She noticed that the nurses wore their uniforms for the journey. The nurses had decided they must always wear them on the move, so that hopefully people that saw them would remember later there were nurses here in captivity.

There was only one very small toilet on board the boat. Made of wood, it was no more than a box suspended on a

frame from the stern. Edie was determined not to use it, but after many hours travelling she decided she could wait no longer. While she was in the toilet queue there was a commotion at the front. An extremely large British woman was trying to squeeze into the wooden box but became stuck halfway. Her downtrodden adult daughter was attempting to free her. Eventually some of the nurses came to help. First, they pulled her out, then they managed to push her into the toilet backwards, while she complained bitterly about being ‘manhandled’. The timber slat walls seemed to bulge around her, and Edie couldn’t help laughing. The nurses were laughing too, although they tried not to show it. Grandma Lillian said she didn’t find it funny, but Edie wasn’t sure she believed that.

Grandma said, ‘A few more weeks in the camp and no-one will need to do that for her any longer. Nothing like a bit of starvation to alter your figure.’

A few more weeks, Edie thought, how long, then, will we be prisoners?

She hoped if Grandpa came back, he would know where they had gone.

DIVIAN

PALEMBANG, SUMATRA, MARCH 1942

Arriving in the evening at Palembang, the prisoners waited for two hours on the dock before being marched through the streets to a school. People jeered at them on the way. Some nurses were annoyed enough to jeer back, especially Blanche. They were held at the school overnight. Everyone was so tired they were certain they would sleep. However, that changed when the guards ordered the lights to be left on all night. With the windows open for ventilation, and the bright lights, the mosquitoes took the opportunity to come in and party.

Next morning, they waited again, this time for hours in full sun on the street while guards sat in the shade, waiting for orders. Most of the prisoners had no hats and felt their brains must boil.

A British officer among the prisoners informed the Japanese that the nurses were all military and should be

treated as such. The Geneva Convention specified how prisoners of war should be treated. One of the agreements was that military prisoners should receive a very small allowance. Any income, no matter how tiny, would allow the nurses to buy perhaps an article of clothing or a little extra food from the local people.

The Japanese refused to believe that the nurses could be military. Women in the army? And what's more, women with officer rank? A ridiculous notion! It was impossible for their captors to accept that these women were to be treated in any other way than as civilians.

But before they were marched off there was more bad news: men and women were to be separated. In vain the wives and mothers cried and begged. The men were told to stand apart. All boys twelve and over must go with the men. Vivian was distressed at the devastation of the families. Who knew when they would see each other again? Men and women clung together and sobbed and made promises. Mothers with barely teenage boys not yet full grown hugged them and protested they were too young. Vivian watched as one boy, not very tall, broke away from his mother and walked across the divide to join his father. The father made him return. 'Your mother needs you,' he said, 'and I need you to look after her and the younger ones.'

It was a dark moment. They left the men and marched until the children were too tired to cry.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG

MARCH / APRIL 1942

The camp was made up of a street of fourteen red tiled brick houses that had once belonged to Dutch families living and working in Palembang. The street had a Dutch name, Irenelaan. Now these empty houses, surrounded by barbed wire, were the home of around six hundred women and children. If Grandpa came, he would be taken to the men's camp, and she wouldn't be with him. Edie felt very dispirited.

As soon as the women had arrived, there had been a scramble to grab a place to sleep. Edie had nothing to keep in her space, which was just as well, as there was only enough room for a mat in the tiny cubicle she shared with Grandma Lillian, a cubicle that once would have been used to store linen. Garages and sheds were also deployed, anywhere that had a roof and walls to keep out the monsoon rain.

Women throughout the camp acted quickly to try and bring some order into their lives. Some of the buildings had a few items of furniture left behind and even some pots good for boiling rice, but mostly the houses had been looted after the occupants were expelled. The looters had clearly not been interested in books, however, which lay scattered around, and these were organised by the women into a 'Camp Library'. Edie loved reading, she loved stories, but there weren't many books that were right for her age and the adult books were quickly reserved by the women in the camp.

Edie's entertainment was to tell herself all the stories she remembered — fairy stories mostly. Without any other girls her age in the camp, Edie spent hours alone, playing all the characters and making up dialogue. Imagination was her great companion and amusement, so much so that at times she forgot who and where she really was.

To imagine herself one of the twelve dancing princesses was a grand diversion. *Sisters, let us cross the lake to the castle with the trees of gold and silver, and dance the night away until our shoes are all worn out. Our father, the King, shall never know our secret nightly adventures!*

To be brought back to earth by the guard's whistle summoning her to parade was a sorrow.

Edie had never known before what it was like to be always hungry. It was like a small animal gnawing at her stomach. Sometimes she spoke to it, *Be quiet down there, you just have to learn to like rice for a while. When it's my birthday perhaps the war will be over, and then you can have jelly and ice cream. Think how nice that will be!*

The inmates of the camp all formed themselves into 'kongsis'. Each kongsi was responsible for cooking for their members. Everyone in a kongsi took turns, so Edie would some days find herself fanning the flames of the brazier with a small bamboo fan. Often the wood for the fire was green and would give off acrid smoke that made Edie cough. But she could pretend to be Cinderella, working while the Ugly Sisters went to the ball, especially if she then had to sweep the street. The broom bristles were made from the fronds of coconut trees that grew near the wire. Occasionally they would manage to grab a coconut — the extra food was welcome, but so was the coconut shell. For Edie and Grandma Lillian, a coconut shell cut in half provided two bowls.

Many of the Dutch civilians had been taken from their own homes straight to the camp and so they were fortunate to have been able to bring with them a suitcase containing clothes, toiletries and other items, like pots and pans. They

were envied by the less fortunate. Some of the women were prepared to share, others were not. Soon Edie saw the nurses being called upon to settle disputes. Her nurse, Bully, walked around the camp chatting cheerfully to everyone. Edie longed to speak to her, but she was too shy.

DIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG

MARCH-APRIL 1942

There was plenty for the nurses to do in their new situation. They decided they would work like district nurses, going around and checking every day on all the houses crowded with occupants. There were also some Dutch nuns in the camp, and they helped by setting up a sort of a 'hospital' in their quarters. The nurses, in their hand-made shorts and tops, felt envious when they saw the nuns' full-length habits, petticoats and bloomers hanging on the fence to dry. As Wilma said, 'What wouldn't we give for some of that material!'

Tenko — the parade call — was one of the most hated moments of the day. Every morning they had to wait in lines in full sun while the guards counted the prisoners. When a guard shouted, '*Kerei!*' and blew his whistle, they must bow low, from the waist, hands by the sides. It made

all the women angry, but when after a couple of days, they learned that they were bowing to Emperor Hirohito in far-away Tokyo, they were even angrier. However, any kind of resistance resulted in painful cuts from the guard's bamboo cane. The nuns decided they could cope by silently directing their bows to God. Soon the idea had caught on around the camp, and the women began to imagine they were bowing to someone they loved or admired. That way, they could almost look forward to the moment and give the very best executed bow willingly.

Some bowed to distant loved ones, some to Jesus, some to famous figures, some to film stars. Norah Chambers, a British violinist, imagined the great classical composers, a different one every day.

'They can't control our minds,' Vivian said, and dedicated her bows to her friends and colleagues on the beach at Bangka.

And so, the days passed, the nurses working in shifts. Jess Doyle was the only nurse with a working wristwatch and at first everyone kept asking her the time. After a while, as the camp routine took hold, knowing what time of day it was seemed less important.

A rather rickety, mouldy piano had been left behind by its Dutch owners. After drying it in the sun it took fourteen

nurses to move it into their house, where one of the youngest nurses, fair haired Shirley Gardam, accompanied them in singalongs.

Sometimes the nurses played a game of deciding who was the most popular person in the camp. The answer would change according to people's needs, but one day Vivian announced that she knew which nurse was currently most popular.

'It's Jenny Greer!'

'Why?'

'Because she has the only pair of eyebrow tweezers.'

Humour was always a good medicine.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, APRIL 1942

Whenever she could, Edie sat in her hidey hole under the steps to listen to the nurses conducting their evening singalongs or talking together. The younger children had been organised into doing lessons during the day, run by the nuns, but Edie had to help the grown-ups in her kongsi with chores. She often felt lonely; there were no other girls her age to talk to. In the evenings she was free and wanted to get away from the grizzling of hungry toddlers being put to bed.

One evening she listened to a few of the nurses as they swapped stories about how they had survived the shipwreck. Everyone had a different story to tell. One nurse called Jessie had been on a raft that had been taken by a current and ended up in the middle of the Japanese invasion fleet. Bully said,

‘Well, a rescue party of sorts!’

‘A couple of the sailors picked us up and took us ashore on their landing craft. I was too weak to step onto land and I fell off the boat onto a rather corpulent Jap.’

It was the first time Edie heard Vivian laugh. She had a nice laugh.

‘A soft landing, then.’

Jessie replied, ‘So, as I said to the girls, I didn’t fall into the *hands* of the Japs, I—’

All the others joined in at once ‘—fell into their *arms*!’

Then they all laughed. It occurred to Edie that the nurses laughed quite often when they were together, more than the other people in the camp. In fact, it sometimes made Grandma irritated if she heard them.

‘What has anyone got to laugh about!’ she grumbled.

But Edie really liked it. Another nurse called Wilma had a different story.

‘I jumped off the ship, landed in the water and a pile of rafts fell on me!’

Blanche said, ‘Gave her a nasty head wound and bugged up her back! She doesn’t complain, but it’s not easy living in these conditions with a crook back.’

Blanche made everyone laugh again when she talked about the raft she had been floating on. Most of the adults had taken it in turns to swim beside the raft, trying to guide

it to the shore. One woman flatly refused to take her turn, even though she could swim. Blanche was so annoyed with her she ended up grabbing her in a headlock. It didn't work apparently. Blanche said, 'I must have lost my touch!'

Another quite tall nurse, but not as tall as Bully, said, 'We were all quite lucky, really. When we surrendered, we must have met some better Japs than you did on the beach, Bully. Iole and I met for the first time in the ocean, hanging onto a raft. We'd been in the water for some hours when we realised we didn't even know each other's names so we introduced ourselves. I said, "Glad to know you, Iole."'

'And I said, "Likewise, Betty!"'

Eddie wished again that she had been christened Betty. Although Iole was a nice name, too, unusual and quite romantic sounding. The Iole nurse was small and pretty, very short — maybe even shorter than Eddie.

'We were trying to get to shore, but progress was so slow, and then night came. And when it got light, we found we were floating away from the island and quite a way out to sea.'

Because Iole was small, Eddie was surprised when Betty said, 'Iole and I were the strongest swimmers, so we decided to swim to shore and try to get a rescue party. We didn't know that the Japs had taken the island. So, we

started swimming, then a current caught the raft and sent it spinning around and away from us.’

Iole had a quiet, polite sort of speaking voice, but Edie heard her say,

‘It went so fast! We could hear them on the raft, calling to us.’

She was upset and Betty had to finish for her.

‘They disappeared over the horizon.’

There was a silence. Edie felt very sad for the people on the raft. What if that had happened to her? She decided after the war she would learn how to swim really well. Bully was sorry, too.

‘What awful bad luck.’

‘We swam for a very long time, hours and hours; when we got to the island, we had to find a landing place. Eventually we came ashore in what we thought was a line of trees—’

Iole finished the sentence, ‘—but it was a mangrove swamp!’

Everyone chorused ‘Ouch!’ Mangrove roots are spikey and razor sharp.

Nurse Iole surprised Edie again. ‘But there were crocodiles around, so we had to brave the mangroves, despite the cuts we got from them.’

Edie thought that was very brave, but the crocodiles

would be worse.

Blanche had been on a raft and then volunteered to swim to shore for help, but she was picked up out of the water by a boat. ‘They got a bit of a shock when I climbed into the boat half naked. My bloody dress had been used on the raft for a bloody sail!’

A nurse called Jenny said that her raft had floated right past the bonfire on Radji Beach where the nurses had been killed, but they hadn’t managed to steer it to shore. At the time she was very dispirited, but next morning it washed up on another beach closer to Muntok where local villagers directed her into the town. Edie guessed that everyone was thinking how fortunate Jenny had been that the current had taken her further that night.

Edie wasn’t sure why she didn’t speak to them. Perhaps she was shy that they wouldn’t want her around. Probably she was afraid they wouldn’t talk freely in front of her; the women in her quarters sometimes hushed their conversation when she arrived, as if she were one of the children. Edie no longer felt in the least like a child.

Bully said, ‘It’s tough here, but at least we’re together, and there’s a lot to do so the days pass quickly. It could be worse.’

Someone said, ‘Apart from the guards!’

No-one replied immediately, but then Blanche spoke, 'Oh, go on, we get along fine. They speak fluent Japanese, we speak fluent English, and the bayonets talk fluently enough for everyone!'

And they all laughed.

VIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, APRIL 1942

One day, Vivian saw some women leaving their house dejectedly, carrying their few belongings. She had no time to ask why. The guards were shouting orders at her and some other nurses while using mime to tell them to clean the now empty house thoroughly. Vivian and the others were doing their best to clean the floors with rags when Iole stopped and sat on her heels.

‘I just realised that when we were in Muntok I missed my birthday!’

‘Me too,’ said Blanche.

There was a chorus of belated Happy Birthdays.

‘Sorry we can’t have a party.’

Vivian had begun cleaning inside a cupboard.

‘In fact, I think we can. There’s a couple of tins of food here!’

‘Bully! Well done — what are they?’

‘Hard to say, it’s written in Dutch. Peas, I think.’
Blanche grabbed them but couldn’t read the labels either.
‘Who cares? Anything and everything goes with rice!’
As they discussed how to share them there was a cry
from Betty in the kitchen.
‘Hey! Here’s a bit of soap, would you believe.’
Amid the exclamations, Betty handed it to Iole.
‘There you are — happy birthday!’
Vivian smiled, ‘You’ll be as beautiful as the Iole in the
Greek myth! We just need a hero Heracles.’
Iole was busy smelling the soap. ‘I’m not likely to meet
my Heracles here!’
Wilma wrung out her cloth. ‘Not in this house, I hear it’s
going to be a Jap officers’ club.’
Betty was shocked. ‘You know what that means, don’t
you girls?’
The others stop cleaning.
‘What?’
‘A brothel.’
There was a silence before Blanche spoke.
‘Who are the lucky ladies for that privilege, then?’
Jessie Simons from Launceston came in to find them at
that moment.
‘Apparently, it’s supposed to be us.’

Hubbub followed as Jessie explained that Win Davis, a young nurse in the camp, had been summoned by the Japanese officers for an 'interview' and given a piece of paper to sign. She got the gist that the nurses were expected to entertain the officers, in other words be 'comfort women.'

'She refused to sign, so a Jap officer said, 'Then you die!' But she took no notice. She told them what she thought of them in no uncertain terms.'

Blanche cheered. 'Good onya, Win! Atta girl! I can think of a few names to call 'em.'

Jessie told them that the Japanese had 'interviewed' other nurses, but they all gave the same response.

'The Japs said they'll withhold all rations to everyone in the camp until we nurses give in.'

Another shocked silence ensued.

'Peas without rice, then,' said Blanche.

Now everyone spoke at once: they couldn't give in, of course they couldn't. But Jessie had more news.

'If we don't turn up to the opening of the club tomorrow night, they say they'll start executing civilians.'

There were gasps.

'Maybe they're bluffing.'

'I wouldn't count on it.'

'Oh, my God!'

Vivian recovered first. 'Right girls, we need a plan.'

Blanche agreed. 'Too right! Better not use your soap, Iole. Don't want to waste it on a Jap!'

It was the soap that gave them an idea, when they had a meeting with all the rest of the group later. The guards had a list with the names of four nurses who were expected to be at the 'club' opening the next evening. The nurses who had been chosen by the Japanese were all small and dark haired.

The nurses meeting decided that instead of those four nurses, twenty others would turn up. And when they turned up, the Japanese officers would be surprised.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, APRIL 1942

Edie had watched the guards as they took chairs, beds and tables into the 'club house' all day. In the evening she secretly followed Vivian and the other nurses when they went to the house. Japanese soldiers were already there, drinking rice wine. Edie knew this wasn't a good idea. The soldiers behaved badly when they'd been drinking. Some of the nurses hid in the bushes, but a large group went up to the steps of the house. They looked very strange — terrible in fact, like scarecrows. Their hair was oiled flat to their heads, they were filthy, and their teeth were blackened. They even smelt bad. Edie was sure she could smell urine on their clothes even from where she waited. She was astonished. The nurses usually worked hard to keep themselves and everyone clean. They were scowling and spitting like old men did sometimes when smoking a pipe.

Japanese soldiers on the verandah waved a bottle of

wine at them, offering them a drink. Edie heard Blanche say, 'Oh, no, Australian girls are nice, they only drink milk. Do you have any milk?'

Edie didn't think the soldiers would have milk. She saw Bully trying hard not to laugh.

DIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, APRIL 1942

The nurses walked into the 'club house' frowning and trying to look fierce, when all they wanted to do was laugh at Blanche — a girl who could drink and swear with the best cattle drovers asking for milk!

The women lined up in the room and stared down the surprised and uneasy soldiers. They refused to sit and refused to eat or drink, although they did grab some buns from the refreshment table for later. After a short while they declared they had done as asked, they'd come to the 'club' and now they were leaving.

As soon as they got outside, soldiers following them grabbed at their arms. Immediately Blanche began to cough and soon the others followed suit. They coughed and spluttered until they were hoarse, until some even fell to the ground. The soldiers backed off, perplexed and nervous, and the nurses took the opportunity to hurry off down the street.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, APRIL 1942

Eddie followed the nurses, very worried. She had never seen such coughing. There was tuberculosis in the camp — supposing Bully became ill! But as soon as the women were out of sight of the soldiers, they started laughing. Eddie understood that they had played a joke on the men. But it was dangerous! Her heart was thumping but she was happy to see them laughing. For a moment it made the war go away.

DIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, MAY 1942

The nurses had made their point and thankfully were spared from attending the 'club'. Now they could concentrate on creating some amusements for themselves in the evenings.

The camp 'library' was very popular even though it only consisted of a box of leftovers from the former inhabitants of the houses. Most were written in Dutch but there were a few books in English, too. 'Gone With the Wind' was so popular it soon became very worn. Many of the books in English were detective stories, but there were so few of them everyone got to read them all at least twice until they felt they must be experts at detecting.

Another way to keep intellectually stimulated was to attend evening 'lectures' held outside in the street when there was enough moonlight. Various women volunteered to give a talk about a topic of which they had some knowledge. Shirley Gadram talked about Tasmania,

Eileen Short about growing up on a cattle station and Winnie Davis recited all the Australian poetry that she remembered. There were talks about butterfly collecting, rubber harvesting and astronomy, games were organised for the children — everyone knew it was important to have small moments of fun and interest to look forward to.

Occasionally a Malay vendor was allowed into the camp, selling bits of food and various items such as needles and soap from his ox cart. Those who had managed to bring some money with them benefited; those without had to resort to bartering with any items they had, or they could offer to work for the more well-off internees — there was no other way to earn a little money. Nurses Jessie Simons and Mavis Hannah became adept at weaving straw hats; another nurse gave haircuts. Vivian had no special skill outside nursing to offer in this situation, but she was prepared to do extra chores for a few coins. Working hard made the day pass and sleep come easily, although some tasks were less welcome than others.

‘Shovelling shit, girls! All in a day’s work!’

Blanche, Vivian and others were attempting to unblock a drain and empty the septic tank. It wasn’t a smell you ever got used to. The overcrowding meant overflowing sewage was a perennial problem in the camp and dysentery was rife.

‘Short rations and sewage — enough to make a saint cranky!’

Vivian agreed, but in fact, people were getting cranky at almost everything. Feeling hungry and anxious was a recipe for flaring tempers. The nurses were getting up a deputation to order one woman who had some tins of milk to share them with the mothers of babies and young children; the woman in question was determined, however, to keep them for her own family’s use.

Blanche was incensed about a different woman — she had managed to bring a suitcase of clothes to the camp.

‘I see her prancing around all got up in different fancy outfits out of her matching suitcases and I can’t help laughing in her face. Where does she think she is? Who the hell here cares how she looks? Just give some bloody clothes to people that need them!’

Vivian had already spoken with the woman in question.

‘She says they are all she has left. People cling to anything they have of their old life.’

‘Well, she should try swimming ashore with nothing, not even bloody shoes!’

‘The wealthiest women aren’t coping well — they aren’t used to communal living, and as for work — they probably had servants, never did a hand’s turn in their lives. At least

we were already used to working and living a communal life. I don't suppose they ever had to share a bathroom, let alone with dozens of others. And they certainly never went hungry.'

'Or shared a toothbrush found in a poxy drain!'

The toothbrush was the subject of jokes, but it was also a sobering reminder of all they had lost.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, MAY 1942

After weeks of watching her nurse from afar, one day Edie suddenly found herself up close.

She was going to help one of the civilians make ‘cookies’ from rice and boiled banana leaves, which could be sold or bartered, and she hoped to sneak past Grandma Lillian. Unfortunately, Lillian was tending a fire outside their quarters, and she grabbed hold of Edie as she passed, sat her down and began inspecting the sores on Edie’s scalp, the result of sandfly bites. She had a pot of water, just boiled.

‘Stand still, child, for goodness’ sake!’

Edie wriggled in her grasp.

‘I’m going to make cookies; I want to exchange them for a hair tie.’

‘If you don’t get these sores seen to, I’ll be cutting off all your hair and you won’t need a hair tie. Why do you never do what I ask you to! It’ll only hurt for a moment.’

'I don't want you to do it!'

'Don't be such a baby!'

'Grandpa wouldn't let you!'

'Well, he's not here, is he? And if you hadn't let go of his hand, we might not have lost him!'

'I couldn't help it! The crowd was pushing me, and the deck was slippery!'

'Stand still! You can't go about with all these disgusting sores on your head.'

And with that, Grandma splashed the scorching water on to Edie's scalp. Edie's screams caught the attention of Vivian who was passing by, and she rushed to intervene.

'Stop that!' she commanded. 'What on earth are you doing?'

'What do you think? Cleaning her up. She's got all these sore places on her head. They're getting infected. Boiling water is best for cleaning in my book. I'm not doing this for fun, you know!'

'But you'll scald her! That's just going to make things worse.'

Grandma Lillian was upset, everything was just too hard. 'She's in my care, I'll decide what's best for her!'

'I'm afraid you won't, not on my watch,' replied Vivian, 'I'll treat her from now on. If I hear of you going near her

with boiling water, you'll have to answer to me and all the other nurses. Believe me, you don't want that.'

'Very well, suit yourself! I didn't ask to be her carer!' The older woman backed away and disappeared indoors.

Vivian sat with Edie and for a moment Edie stared at Vivian, tongue tied.

'Your grandmother isn't happy, but your poor head must be treated properly.'

Edie's scalp hurt and she felt mistreated and angry. Because of that she suddenly lost her shyness.

'She's not my real grandma, she's my step-grandma. I hate her! She's an old misery guts!'

'Well, everyone's tired and frightened. Life here isn't easy. Is it just the two of you?'

Edie took her handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her eyes. It was the only one she possessed and the embroidered initials in the corner reminded her of how her life had been, when she had a drawerful of handkerchiefs, crisp and white. This handkerchief had been a present from her beloved big brother Ronald, who was now fighting somewhere far away in this awful war.

She told Vivian about the *Giang Be* and the bombing.

'I lost my grandpa when we were sinking. Everyone was rushing and pushing to get onto the lifeboat. I tried to stay

with him, I really did.'

'Of course you did, none of it was your fault.'

'I loved my grandpa; I kept hoping he got to shore, and that he'd come and find me! But I don't think that anymore. Now I don't think I'll ever see him again. All I have left that I care about is my mother's gold bangle.'

When Vivian saw the thin gold bangle, she spoke urgently. 'Oh, but that's valuable, you must hide it!'

'I keep it covered in mud. No-one knows it's gold. It's like something from a fairy tale. I love fairy tales and make believe, don't you, Sister? I can close my eyes and imagine I'm in one.'

Vivian was very taken with this eager and lonely young girl.

'Who's your favourite character?'

'Cinderella, of course. I pretend a coconut will become my coach and the mice in the camp the horses to pull it. Only they should be white mice, of course. I'm fourteen and I know it's baby stuff, really, but I do love stories.'

She was twisting her handkerchief in her hands and Vivian gently took it from her and began twiddling with it as she spoke.

'Some people are frightened of mice, but I think they're rather sweet,' she said, as her hands moved.

'I always wanted a white mouse for a pet.'

'Like this?'

Edie saw that Vivian had twisted the handkerchief into a shape with two ears and a tail and was making it twitch and jump.

'It *is* like a mouse!' Suddenly Edie felt shy again. 'Can I keep him?'

'Of course. Imagining isn't baby stuff, you know, we all need daydreams. Especially in here.' Vivian was smiling her brilliant smile. 'What will you call him?'

'Hank! Hank the Mouse!'

Vivian said she thought that was rather clever. 'What's your name?'

Edie thought about saying her favourite name, Betty. But she wanted to seem grown up and to have a name that sounded strong and forceful, Betty might not sound bold enough.

'It's actually Edith Kenneison and people here call me Edie, but I prefer to be called Bet.'

'Well, I'm Vivian Bullwinkel and people here call me Bully, but I prefer to be called Viv. I'll see you every day and bathe your head and we'll get it better, Little Bet.'

Edie wouldn't normally have liked the 'little' part, but when Viv said it, somehow it was different, comforting.

Vivian was strong and kind and Edie was thrilled when she said,

‘I think we’re going to be friends.’

Now Edie wasn’t shy. ‘I knew we would be.’

‘How so?’

‘I saw you arriving at Muntok. I felt like I already knew you. I think Grandpa sent you.’

VIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, JUNE 1942

'Bully, you can play Greta Garbo!'

There was a bit of a resemblance between the statuesque Vivian and the famous movie star, and since the nurses were planning on putting on a concert and revue with comedy sketches about Hollywood, Vivian was cast as the mysterious Garbo.

'Wilma, you must play Mae West, and Beryl, you can be Shirley Temple.'

Along with Shirley Gardam on the piano, Elaine singing and other acts, they were able to entertain the camp and could for a little while forget their circumstances.

Often there were events they needed to forget. Some of the guards would slap and kick the women for the slightest 'crime'. Maybe they hadn't bowed low enough when the guard passed, maybe they hadn't responded quickly enough to an order. Vivian noticed not every guard acted

cruelly all the time, but they were so inconsistent, and there were some who always seemed to enjoy meting out punishments. Once she was made to stand stock still for an hour in full midday sun without a hat. Edie was distressed for her; she couldn't understand why the Japanese seemed to hate them so much. True they were on the side of the enemy, but they themselves were no threat. Vivian told her a little of the talk around the camp about the Japanese culture and how it affected the soldiers.

'They've been taught to think that surrender is unforgivable. They themselves would rather commit suicide than be taken captive, and if they did surrender and become a prisoner, I heard they might even be executed when they got home; it's considered shameful.'

'But we aren't soldiers, why despise women and girls?'

'We behave differently to Japanese women; they think us too bold and independent. I say thank goodness for that, it helps us survive!'

Behind the nurse's house was a cemetery for Chinese workers, where people would at times bring food to put on the graves instead of flowers. That seemed strange to the Australians but also fortuitous. Sometimes in the dark they could reach through the wire and grab a mango or a papaya. This made a wonderful addition to rice and

vegetable stalks. The nurses were worried about the monotony of their diet. Virtually no protein and no fresh fruit. Bananas grew all around them outside the camp, but none were given to the inmates.

One day, an elderly Chinese man at the cemetery saw the women at the fence and took pity on them. He threw a loaf of bread over the wire, but to the nurses' horror a guard spotted him. The man was dragged into the camp, beaten, tied to a post and left in the sun for several days as a warning to others. The women were forbidden to help him. The elderly man, still tied to his post, eventually died. Throughout the camp the inmates grieved his death and felt cast down by this horror.

One of the nurses, Flo Trotter, held a little 'church' service on Sundays which was a solace to many at these dreadful times, and that's when Vivian first heard The Captive's Hymn.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, JULY 1942

Edie knew there was a choir. Several women in the camp sang well and the musical and talented Norah Chambers had organised them into a fine group of voices. They sang in part harmony unaccompanied, and Vivian came to fetch Edie one Sunday.

‘Little Bet, you must come at once and hear the choir, they really are excellent!’

Grandma Lillian had chores arranged for Edie, but the nurses had some authority so she agreed Edie could be spared. She said, however, she could not come herself. As they walked away, Vivian felt it was a pity that Edie’s grandma wouldn’t come to enjoy the music. Edie was thinking the same.

‘She’s very worried. She has a son fighting in the war. He might be a prisoner. We don’t know where all our family are, and we don’t get any news here. It makes her sad.’

Vivian was touched. 'Little Bet, you're very wise, of course she's worried and you are worried, too. And with all this sorrow in your step-grandma's life she probably doesn't feel she should enjoy herself, even if she could.'

Eddie was proud that Vivian thought her wise. In fact, she was learning about people and starting to recognise why they might behave in a certain way. In just a few months she had been forced to grow up. At school in the convent, she had lived a very protected life with nothing to think about except lessons, games and gossip among the other pupils. Now she had seen things that no-one had ever expected her to see.

When the choir started singing, Eddie was entranced. The Captives Hymn had been written by an English woman in the camp, Margaret Dryburgh, who had been a teacher and missionary. The voices were lovely, but the words struck home in a way Eddie wouldn't have imagined.

*Give us patience to endure,
Keep our hearts serene and pure,
Grant us courage, charity ...*

Having seen Miss Dryburgh around the camp, Eddie knew she was a very generous woman who never said

anything unkind about anyone, even the Japanese. Unlike so many others, she was never angry with her neighbours or spoke bitterly about being a prisoner.

*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.*

Eddie thought how hopeful that sounded. Now she knew why Miss Dryburgh was always kind to everyone — she had hope. Eddie wanted to be like that.

As they left the service, Vivian was limping badly. Both she and Wilma had a painful fungal infection on their feet. They stopped to sit for a moment when suddenly a British woman stood in front of them. She was shouting in their faces, accusing them of stealing her rations.

Eddie was shocked, she knew this was untrue, the nurses often gave away some of their own rations to help people who were sick. She tried to say so, but the woman wouldn't listen. She was shouting, 'Give yourselves airs and graces when we all know you're just playthings for the Jap officers!'

Vivian didn't shout back, she spoke in a moderate tone, but nevertheless she sounded crosser than Edie had ever heard her. 'That's pure nonsense and you know it!'

But the woman wouldn't stop. 'Stuck up bitches, all of you!'

Edie thought that if the woman was ever ill, she would be glad of the nurses' help and know how kind they were. Vivian and Wilma were angry, but still, they didn't shout. There was one nurse, however, who might well respond like with like, and at that moment Blanche arrived on the scene.

'Hold your horses! Everyone's hungry, we get it, but letting off like that with a load of cobblers doesn't help!'

'I'm not taking orders from officers' whores!'

The woman was not going to stand down, but neither was Blanche.

'Just belt up and skedaddle or there'll be a bloody big blue!'

The woman lunged at Blanche.

They fell to the ground struggling and pulling each other's hair. Edie watched with mouth wide open. She had seen other women in the camp arguing and occasionally they would get physical. People would fight sometimes over a missing spoon, or not enough room to sleep. But she

had never seen anyone attack a nurse. Fortunately, it soon stopped. Fights never came to much — everyone knew the guards might step in, and they'd be much worse! As the woman walked away, Wilma commented,

'She has small kids. The hardest thing in this place is to see the children's faces, all hollowed out.'

Blanche wasn't quite as forgiving. 'A roo loose in the top paddock, if you ask me!'

Vivian said, 'Everyone feels a little mad at times.'

Eddie thought of the words in the hymn they had just listened to, '*O'er the world may brothers be.*' War could make people enemies inside the camp as well as outside. She hoped that one day they could all be 'sisters' instead. She hated seeing adults angry with each other, and how could people say mean things about the nurses of all people? But deep down she knew that the jealousy was caused by desperation. The nurses were envied because there was harmony in their kongsi. They were used to living and working together and they cared about each other, they looked after each other and shared everything fairly. There was no division of race or class or status. Not all kongsis were as fortunate.

Eddie also knew there were some women in the camp who had agreed to fraternise with the Japanese and there

were others that looked down on them and called them names. But some of those women were desperate to protect others or to obtain a bit of extra food for ailing children, and others shared out anything they received with those who needed it most. Nevertheless, some other women in Irenelaan even spat on them. If Edie learned anything from the camp, it was that deprivation could bring out the worst in people. It wasn't easy to remain hopeful.

The fight between Blanche and the woman had affected Edie. That evening as she walked around the camp with Vivian hobbling beside her, Vivian, noticing the girl was unusually quiet, interrupted her thoughts.

'Is something wrong, Little Bet?'

Edie found it hard to explain exactly how she felt, so she just said,

'Everything here is so sad and horrible.'

'Not everything, Little Bet. You can look up at the stars, imagine yourself there.'

Edie looked up. The stars were so bright and so friendly, she could imagine herself floating free among them. She wondered why she hadn't thought of that before.

'Not everything here is a prisoner, Little Bet, look around you.'

Edie did look around her and she realised Vivian was

right. They began to play a game finding things in the camp that weren't prisoners. Edie spotted a flower on the vines, then she saw a line of insects scurrying under the barbed wire fence. When they saw the fireflies dancing, Edie danced, too. She knew that Vivian was undoubtedly the very best thing that had happened to her in the camp, maybe in her whole life.

Vivian had to go into the camp 'hospital' for a few weeks, cared for by the nuns until her feet healed. Edie was obliged to walk on her own for a while, but she went on with the game of finding things that were free. She still sometimes felt sad; 26 November came round — it was her fifteenth birthday. She had never imagined she would have a birthday as a prisoner. She watched the fireflies that evening and imagined they were doing a birthday dance just for her. She went to the wire fence and stuck her hand through it.

'Now my hand is free. One day all of me will be free ...'

VIVIAN

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, CHRISTMAS 1942

Occasionally, a working party of the men, held prisoner in a camp in the jungle not very far away, could be seen from the women's camp in the distance, under guard, as they passed by in single file. When she heard the cry '*Our men!*' Vivian would help lift the smaller children onto a ledge or a roof to look. Her heart ached for the women and children hoping to spot husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. If they were spotted there was great joy, shouting of names and frantic waving — their menfolk were still alive and apparently well enough to work.

As Christmas approached the separation of families was felt very keenly. The choir had been practicing carols, and the camp had a plan for the days leading up to Christmas if the men should go by. But the days passed and soon it was Christmas Eve and the men had not been seen. Everyone was disappointed, but mothers put children to bed with

as much promise of excitement for the next day as they could muster. Everyone had made what gifts they were able from the little that they had. For the children maybe a ball or doll sewn together from pieces of cloth and stuffed with coconut fibre, maybe a wooden animal carved with a borrowed knife. For the adults maybe a coconut filled with palm oil and a little wick for a nightlight, or a pack of cards made from scraps of paper or bark.

Christmas morning dawned and at eight o' clock Vivian heard the cry go up, 'Our men!' And sure enough, a column of prisoners came through the trees. At once the women's camp sprang into action. After they had waved at their men passing by, they organised themselves for a practice. When the men returned at the end of the day, marching wearily along the path, instead of the usual calls, the women burst into a rendition of 'O Come All You Faithful' with all the gusto they could summon.

The column of men stood still to listen, even the guards stopped in wonder. It was a very moving moment for both sides and tears were shed, especially when that carol was followed with a beautiful rendition of 'Silent Night'. At the end of the carol there was silence, and then the men picked up the tune and sang a verse back to them. As they listened to the deep voices of the men singing the beautiful melody

across the space between them, Vivian thought that they could not have had a better Christmas present.

On New Year's Eve' the nurses sang 'Auld Lang Syne' and Chris Oxley from Charters Towers in Queensland treated them to a surprise. She had made chilli wine for them for a celebration. When Chris brought out the tobacco tin full of purple fluid, Vivian was surprised. 'You're surely not going to drink that stuff? I thought it must be for cleaning the latrines!'

Blanche was one of the first to take a sip. For a moment she couldn't speak, then she pronounced, 'Liquid dynamite, mate, liquid dynamite!'

Vivian decided to pass. Blanche urged her, 'Just have a sip.'

Betty shook her head at Vivian. 'Or you could just pour petrol down your throat and set it alight. Probably feel the same!'

It was always good to end the evening laughing.

EDIE

IRENELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, JANUARY 1943

Everyone talked for days about the men singing on Christmas Day. Edie was always rather sad when the men passed by as she had no-one to wave to. It made her miss her grandfather a great deal — it would have felt so good to know that he was close by, even if she couldn't be with him. But then, early in the new year, the men were moved to a new location and although it wasn't far away, they no longer passed by the women's camp.

Life went on, and Edie was given the job of rice picker. When the guards brought in the rice now, it looked as though it had been swept up off the street. It was full of stones, dirt and bits of glass, not to mention maggots and weevils. Edie's job as a rice picker was to spread it out and sift the rice from the rubbish. Then she helped divide it into pots for the different kongsis, a portion for each member of the group. One day when she took the rice to Vivian's

quarters, Vivian reached out for the pot and Edie noticed how thin her arms had become. Then she looked at her own. She was glad she didn't have a mirror. Later she found Grandma Lillian resting. Grandma was often very tired these days.

Edie asked, 'Do I look like a stick insect?'

Grandma Lillian regarded her. 'You have grown a little bit; your legs are longer.'

'But they're so thin and ugly.'

'Not at all, in fact they're quite elegant. When there's another party, you can wear the sarong that I was keeping for best and tie up your hair and you'll look very pretty.'

Edie hugged her. It was the nicest thing Grandma Lillian had ever said to her. She knew she was getting too thin, just like everyone else in the camp, but she looked forward to wearing the colourful sarong.

VIVIAN

IRELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, MARCH 1943

One day an officer came and gave the nurses postcards. It took them a little while to understand that they were to use them to write home. They were astonished but delighted to be doing something to connect them to their families. There were only five lines for writing, what should they say? Vivian spent some time thinking before she wrote.

Dear Mother, they have given us postcards so we can write to you! Sorry to cause you so much worry, but don't. My roving spirit has been somewhat checked, but I have not and never will regret leaving home. I am very well. How is John? My love to him and tell all my friends I am well. Many Happy returns of last month, Mum. I hope you are well, keep smiling! Lots of love, Viv.

Wilma was smiling at Vivian, 'Did you write a book, Bully?'

Vivian sighed, 'It's so hard to know what to say. What's the point in worrying them?'

'Hope you didn't mention the dysentery.'

'Not on your nelly!'

'Keep it light and bright,' said Iole. 'The main thing is they'll know we're still alive.'

Jessie Simons was pondering over hers.

'Wish we could tell them what was really happening, then maybe they could hurry the army into sending a rescue for us!'

Blanche gave a small cheer. 'Now there's a thought. I can see a battalion of Aussie soldiers coming down the street in shorts, tall and handsome.'

Betty whistled. 'All muscled with sunburnt legs!'

Now they all cheered. Just the thought of their families receiving the postcards had raised their spirits a great deal. It made them feel closer to home.

EDIE

IRELAAN CAMP, PALEMBANG, AUGUST 1943

The weeks went by, and Edie had begun to feel that the pattern of her days was now her normal life. Then, a delivery of wood was made to the camp. The women were told to unload it off the truck. Hidden among the logs on a flat piece of wood was a note, written in charcoal.

WE ARE GOING TO BANGKA

It was from the men's camp.

There was consternation. The men were being moved back to the island, so far away! For once, Edie was rather glad that she didn't have anyone in the men's camp to be concerned about. A pall of gloom hung over the families, and they had scarcely processed that news, when they heard that they were to move too.

A day later all the inmates were loaded onto trucks and

taken to a new camp. They were shocked when they saw it. Apparently, this had been the men's camp at Lahat — a camp their men had been made to build for themselves after they were moved six months earlier. But what shocked the women so much was the state of it.

When the men had been told they were moving, they hadn't realised that the Japanese wanted the houses in the Irenelaan camp for themselves. They didn't know the guards would move the women to live in their old camp. Deciding to make life as difficult as they could for their captors, the men had thoroughly trashed it before they left.

Eddie thought how they had complained about living in the Irenelaan camp. Now it seemed luxurious to have been living in houses. Here they were no longer in houses but in barracks! A rectangle of crudely built long bamboo huts with slats for walls and palm frond roofs that they knew would let the rain through in the wet season so that it would be impossible to keep dry. There were no streets, just a dusty compound.

In the barrack huts, they were crowded together more than ever; their allotted sleeping/living place was 50 centimetres by 1.8 metres each on a long bamboo platform, and there was only one kitchen in the camp where the food was doled out.

Now the women were no longer in their kongsis, the little groups that had eventually come to feel like family. And not only that, but there was only one communal bathroom with a large rectangular basin. All the water had to be brought from a well, and then they must stand close together, naked, with one rationed tin of water each to wash.

Edie couldn't imagine ever being clean enough to wear Grandma's best sarong, let alone looking pretty.

PART FOUR

FRIENDSHIP

'You don't know what you can face until you must'.

Vivian Bullwinkel

DIVIAN

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, SEPTEMBER 1943

The nurses set to and worked hard to clean up this new camp of its filthy mess and make it habitable. They were worried about the health of the inmates but also about the morale. Now there could be no more singlaongs or schooling or lectures or fun — there simply wasn't room. And no library — they had only been allowed to take what they could carry. Everyone had to volunteer for community work, especially the carting of water from the well with the heavy rusty buckets carried on a wooden rod that cut into their shoulders. The biggest portion of water had to be taken to the guards for the splash baths that the women yearned for themselves.

The worst job was cleaning the overflowing latrines using a coconut shell on a wooden pole. It was difficult not to be overcome by the fumes.

The rice rations were reduced in the new camp and the

internees were given wooden mattocks and told to dig to plant cassavas — apparently to help feed themselves and the guards. Filled with resentment at having to give up part of the tiny camp to growing crops, the women, no longer strong, hacked at the ground in the heat, dust blowing in their faces and sweat trickling down their backs. The dry season meant that the ground was like rock, but the guards shouted at them to keep working.

Manual work on such short rations was taking its toll. There were deaths in the camp amongst the weakest.

One evening the nurses were crushing charcoal to add to water as a remedy for diarrhoea. Not a very effective remedy, but all that they had.

Blanche was fuming about the Japanese camp captain whom the nurses had petitioned for medicines. ‘Captain Seiki, the Sadist! “No need medicine” he says, “plenty room in the cemetery.” Bastard!’

Betty sighed. ‘Just a bit of Vitamin B would get rid of the beri beri. Some beans, a bit of beef or pork ...’

More and more of the inmates were succumbing to beri beri, and the weakness and swollen legs made them bedridden. It also meant a loss of appetite, so that they must be persuaded to eat, but everyone else dreamt constantly of food. Sometimes they would tell each other recipes of a

favourite dish, and they would imagine the flavours with each mouthful of rice.

‘What do you miss most about home?’ Wilma started the conversation and Iole quickly jumped in.

‘That’s easy, books!’

‘And a cold beer!’ added Blanche.

Iole laughed, ‘Yes, a beer — but a cold lemonade would be even nicer.’

Jessie asked, ‘Are we counting food? Just the smell of a roast dinner would set me up for a week!’

Wilma shook her head, ‘No. Not food or family. What else? Shirley, I’m thinking your piano?’

‘Yes, my piano ... but also gardens.’

Mina Raymond agreed, ‘I do miss roses.’

Shirley’s thin face was as pale as her fair hair in the moonlight.

‘Jungle flowers are lovely, but there’s nothing like the smell of roses after rain. And boronia!’

‘I think I miss a bathroom most ...’ said Vivian. ‘No, just a bath!’

‘And clean clothes,’ added Betty, ‘and I know you said no food, but my second answer would be no weevils in my rice!’

This made Wilma laugh. ‘Oh, when we get out of here, I’m never eating rice again!’

‘What will you do when you get out?’ Vivian didn’t want to think of food. ‘Where will you be, Iole, when you are fifty? Still nursing?’

‘Probably not, unless by then married women can be nurses. I expect to be married with a family ... and books!’

Betty joined in, ‘I think I’d want to continue nursing, wouldn’t you, Wilma?’

‘Oh, I don’t know — living in the country would be nice. Milking cows maybe — something peaceful.’

Blanche thought that was hilarious.

‘Getting up at dawn for milking? I don’t mind a day’s hard work, but after all this I’m not going to be tied to a routine for a while.’

Jessie was suddenly serious.

‘You know what? I don’t look forward more than a month. Four weeks more of captivity — twenty-eight days — I think I can cope with that. Every day I think, if I can just stay alive for one more month, who knows, things might improve, the war might end even ... best just to just live month by month ...’

EDIE

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, NOVEMBER 1943

The weeks passed and in November the rains came along with another birthday.

Edie thought all the women in the camp were beginning to look like a bunch of scarecrows. Now and then she played with the small children. They didn't know any other world than this. Sometimes Edie felt that was a good thing, other times it made her so sad she just wanted to be alone. But it was almost impossible to be alone in this camp except in your head. The fairy tales were not so easy to summon now.

When she thought of her family and schoolfriends it was as though they belonged to another person. Edie felt like she had lived two lives. This was her community now, but there wasn't a great deal of comfort in it — except for Vivian.

Vivian sat beside her on her sleep mat. It was raining

hard, and the water dripped through the roof onto them, but it was dryer than outside where the ground was turning into mud. It was crowded in the shed — everyone wanted shelter. The smell of a hundred women, damp clothes and wet vegetation made Edie feel that everything was rotten. Grandma Lillian was trying to sleep. Her dark hair was now almost completely grey — she had covered her head to try and keep out the noise of the small children whining because they were hungry and bored, but with that and the noise of the rain, Edie thought sleep must be impossible.

‘How’s Hank? Is he behaving himself? He hasn’t been tempted to run off and join the rats around the camp?’

Vivian always managed to make Edie smile. Hank the handkerchief mouse never left her side.

‘He doesn’t much like the rain, but now and again I tell him he must sit in it to get clean. He never really complains, though, even when I need to use him to wipe my nose. I think he likes the company and it’s safe in my pocket. He hides when he sees the guards, he’s frightened of the bayonets.’

The thought of the guards spoiled the moment and Edie felt suddenly angry.

‘Yesterday one of the guards shouted at a mother and pointed his bayonet at her when she didn’t bow — she was

trying to pick up her little boy so he wouldn't get trodden on. Why are they so mean? Do they hate us because they don't want to be in this horrid place, and they think it's all our fault?'

Vivian wished she had a good explanation. 'I don't suppose they want to be here.'

'Neither do we! They seem to be nasty when they don't even need to be. Why don't they ever feel sorry for us?'

'I don't know. Perhaps they think they are following orders.'

'I think maybe cruel people must believe in a cruel god, or at least it suits them to and that gives them an excuse to torture us!'

'I'm not sure we'll ever understand, Little Bet, but whatever happens to us, try not to feel bitter. Bitterness destroys you. When I see something that makes me angry, I make sure I go and do something good for someone. All those little kindnesses help make up for the bad things, and they also help me to feel better.'

Eddie squeezed Vivian's hand. She could feel the bones protruding, but they were very capable hands, certainly capable of kindnesses. The nurses looked out for one another and looked after other people. Eddie knew they must be angry sometimes — angry and despairing, even

Vivian. But they tried not to show it. Grandma Lillian said it was 'their duty.' Edie had said that wasn't fair, she thought they shouldn't always have to be the ones working hardest, the ones who tried to make things right, but now, suddenly she realised that it gave them a purpose. Maybe that was a good thing, the reason they could keep going, looking after others, Vivian looking after Edie. What if Edie's duty was looking after Vivian? She could watch over her, look for little kindnesses to help her. She looked at Vivian and saw how gaunt her face had become. But her very blue eyes still held her smile. Edie knew the rain would stop one day.

DIVIAN

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, DECEMBER 1943

With no news from outside the camp and no knowledge of how the war was going, it was very difficult for the internees when the guards would tell them lies about the war's progress – suggesting that Australia and England were about to be invaded. The nurses knew morale in the camp was very low and that something needed to be done — low spirits didn't improve health or resilience.

They were all relieved when Margaret Dryburgh and Norah Chambers told them that they were reorganising the choir and were busy recruiting around the camp. They rehearsed in the evenings behind the kitchen area, and no-one outside the choir was to listen; they were rehearsing something special, and everyone was sworn to secrecy, as Miss Dryburgh had written something new. They had been rehearsing for several weeks when Miss Dryburgh and Norma announced there was to be a concert on 27 December.

A few women proclaimed that was unwise, it may anger the guards and anyway singing would take up too much energy in their weakened condition. It soon became evident, however, that the singers returned energised and happy from rehearsals. There was a lot of anticipation around the camp, which helped everyone face the thought of another Christmas without loved ones.

On Christmas Eve, Vivian was looking for Edie when, to her surprise, she saw the girl sitting under the hut where the Japanese guards ate their evening meal. She whispered urgently.

‘Little Bet! What are you doing?’

Edie put her finger to her lips and crawled out to join her.

‘It’s the guards’ dinner time.’

‘Oh, Little Bet, why are you torturing yourself? You surely aren’t going to beg from them? They’ll punish you!’

‘They’re such messy eaters. Look!’ She held out a small tin. ‘Grains of rice fall through the floor. Sometimes I collect enough to make a whole spoonful!’

‘Be careful, it’s dangerous!’

‘All the kids do it. Sometimes I think they know we’re there. Anyway, it’s worth it.’

Vivian hugged her. She felt full of pity for the children.

On Christmas Eve they should be dreaming of presents to come, not hoping for a few extra grains of rice!

‘Maybe because it’s Christmas there might be special food!’

‘But the Japanese don’t celebrate Christmas, Little Bet.’

‘No, I suppose not. I do have a little bit here to give Grandma, though.’

‘And tomorrow we’ll sing some carols. And in two days’ time it will be the concert!’

‘I’m going to wear Grandma’s sarong.’

EDIE

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, 27 DECEMBER 1943

Most of those who were not laid low by malaria or dysentery were making an effort to smarten themselves up for the concert. Edie wrapped her sarong tightly and combed the tangles from her hair. Mothers smoothed children's locks and tried to keep them from playing in the dirt and getting muddied.

Edie was waiting for the nurses to arrive, but when she saw Vivian, she was perplexed for a moment. Vivian looked different; her generous mouth was suddenly aflame. Then she noticed all the nurses were the same. The one red lipstick they possessed between them, which they had been saving for liberation day, had been deployed. They had decided to use it in celebration of this special occasion. Edie thought they looked a little strange, their wan faces contrasted starkly with their scarlet mouths. But when they laughed it looked suddenly wonderful and added a bit of

glamour to the occasion.

The compound was filling up as people arrived at 4.30pm. The concert must be over before darkness fell. Fortunately, considering it was the wet season, the rain was holding off. The ground was just about dry enough to sit on. Those who could no longer sit comfortably because of their too skinny behinds stood at the back. Scratched into the ground on a large space was the word ORCHESTRA. The members of the audience gathered around that space, surprised. There were no instruments in the camp. Had the choir managed to make some?

The thirty strong choir came out from behind the kitchen. Three of the nurses were amongst the singers, Betty Jeffrey, Mickey Syers and Flo Trotter. Miss Dryburgh faced the audience, and Edie noticed her Mary Jane shoes had long lost their buttons and were tied with string. Through her cracked spectacles she looked at the assembled company and announced that the choir members were going to reproduce an orchestra with their voices.

‘We long to hear again some of the great classical masterpieces, the wonderful melodies and harmonies that uplifted our souls in days gone by. Dvorak’s “Largo” from the New World Symphony, A waltz by Brahms, Mendelssohn’s “Song Without Words”, Beethoven’s dainty

“Minuet”, Tchaikovsky’s “Andante Cantabile”, Chopin’s “Raindrop Prelude” and Débussy’s “Rêverie”. Please close your eyes and imagine yourselves in a concert hall.’

Miss Dryburgh sang a note to give the pitch, then took her place among the alto singers. Norah Chambers now took her place as conductor and raised her hands.

Edie recognised some of the music when she heard it, but it didn’t matter if you knew it or not. Once the choir started, even the smallest children sat spellbound. There were no words, but the ‘la, la, la’ of Miss Dryburgh’s deep voice carried the melancholy first notes of the English horn in the Largo and the other voices joined in portraying all the different instruments. The music filled Edie’s head and she felt both happy and sad at the same time. She looked at Vivian, whose face was tilted to the sky, eyes closed. Edie would have liked to ask her if she felt the same way, but she didn’t want to break the moment.

VIVIAN

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, 27 DECEMBER 1943

Vivian wouldn't have been able to answer Edie, her heart was too full, and she felt as though her whole body was a conduit for the music. The high notes sang in her head and the low notes reverberated around her ribs. She was floating ... she could see tall, graceful gums with white bark fingers pointing in the moonlight, outlined against the black of night ... she could see the wide brown paddocks of her childhood under a blazing blue sky ... now she could see the faces of all the brave women on the beach. Her soul spoke to them.

You're there, somewhere among the stars, you're still with us. Matron, are you still looking out for them all? Why am I here? I think of you every day, my twenty-one hearts. When I'm free, girls, then I'll tell the world about you, I promise ...

The singing entranced everyone. Hunger vanished, the camp vanished, the war vanished, as they listened every

burden was lifted. Even the guards stood in wonder.

Now everyone knew that when Miss Dryburgh quoted the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, and said, 'Music gives soul to the universe and wings to the mind,' she wasn't being fanciful.

For a while everyone was free.

The guards, surprisingly, weren't angered, and more concerts were planned. Full of admiration and astonishment for Miss Dryburgh's immense skill at notating all that music from memory, every woman knew they had witnessed something extraordinary. It was widely agreed that Miss Dryburgh, Norah Chambers and their music saved lives.

EDIE

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, JANUARY-JULY 1944

As the weeks went by, Edie looked for opportunities to perform a myriad of small kindnesses for Vivian. This was her new purpose, she knew that the camp could not only bring out the worst in people, but it could also bring out the best. Dreaming up helpful acts, even if they weren't noticed, filled her days. She found a tin to pour a small extra ration of water into Vivian's portion in the washroom, she smoothed Vivian's sleep mat and mended her mosquito net. Now they were taken on working parties outside the camp to plant vegetables, working from five in the morning until six at night, and they all became even weaker on their meagre rations. But Edie walked beside Vivian in the evenings and invented stories about Hank the mouse to make her laugh. Sometimes Edie felt almost happy. Even when the women around her on their sleep mats griped at one another, criticised each other's children,

complained about noise and fought over an inch of space — even then, planning on how to improve Vivian's day brought her pleasure.

This way she felt she could endure the monotony and hardships of camp life as the weeks extended into months. The trick was to feel grateful for what you had. Edie had Vivian to look up to. In the stories she told herself, Vivian was her fairy godmother who had come into her life when she needed her most. Always Edie looked forward to talking with her. And always she looked forward to another concert. When the moment came, she sat and marvelled how the 'Raindrop Prelude' felt just like the heavy stillness of the jungle before the rain came, then the voices sounded like raindrops as they began pattering on leaves, before building and dying away again. She had never realised before how music could speak to you like that.

DIVIAN

MEN'S CAMP, SUMATRA, AUGUST 1944

The wail of air raid sirens and ack-ack of anti-aircraft guns brought the internees running into the compound one evening. As they stared at the sky the sound of bombs falling in the distance had them cheering. It must be the Allies! The guards came rushing to chase the women back into their huts, but a couple of days later more bombs dropped. Never until now had the sounds of war been so welcome. What did this mean? Would the war soon be over, did the Allies know where they were? Edie listened to the women around her as they excitedly discussed the possibilities. But no more planes came, and soon life went back to the dreary norm of gossip and complaints.

Then, a few weeks later, the command came to pack their few belongings again. They were being moved back to Bangka Island.

The nurses speculated about the reason for the move.

Perhaps the Japanese were expecting an Allied invasion. Surely the return to Muntok would be their last camp? Maybe, just maybe, this was a turn for the better.

When they arrived at the wharf, the nurses were ordered to load all the luggage from the camp onto the decrepit old boat. They knew this was designed to humiliate them in front of the locals, as loading a ferry was work for labourers, never for women.

Betty remarked, 'Seiki's certainly got it in for us nurses.'

Blanche may have been out of breath, but not so much that she couldn't reply,

'My bloody oath! I reckon it's because he's short and he can't stand Aussie women being taller than him.'

Vivian couldn't resist standing tall, her hands on her hips, for a few seconds.

'Yeah, go Bully! You show 'em!'

The guards shouted, but the nurses had already tossed the last bag on board and now they sank down onto the wharf for a rest, musing on what was ahead.

'First stop Muntok, Malaria City.'

'On Fever Island!'

'The guards said that we're going to a better camp.'

'They say that every time. They like to give us hope but in fact it's always worse!'

Captain Seiki was back, and they struggled to their feet trying hard not to look mutinous. Vivian just couldn't believe the gestured and shouted orders he was giving.

'Now they want us to load these sacks of rice on board!'

'They can't be serious! In our weakened state? There're hundreds of them. How much more can we take?'

But serious they were. And the nurses had no choice.

Blocking all thoughts from their minds, they doggedly shifted bag after bag, up the gangway onto the ferry. They had to endure, like automatons, for hours.

Finally, at three in the morning, they collapsed onto the deck of the ferry. And at first light, they were on their way back to where they had begun their captivity — Bangka Island.

EDIE

BARRACKS CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, AUGUST 1944

The journey back to Bangka was even worse than the journey from there over a year before. The miserable trip downriver, everyone crammed on deck and unable to move, was made more miserable by being unable to relieve themselves. Edie remembered almost fondly the wooden contraption on the stern of the other boat.

Before long, a little girl near Edie needed badly to urinate and began to cry in distress. A young guard whom Edie didn't recognise spoke to the child, who clung to her mother. Edie, embarrassed, tried to signal to him why the little girl was crying. She expected a rebuke, but instead the guard took off his tin helmet and, with mime, showed the girl's mother how it could be used as a chamber pot. It was a gesture so unexpected and surprising that Edie stared at him. He was, after all, a human being! He saw her expression and Edie was shocked when she saw the

understanding in his eyes. It was a moment of recognition, and then he looked politely away while the little girl squatted to use the helmet, which was then passed along the line until it could be emptied over the side. The young guard didn't try to retrieve the helmet, and before the journey was over almost every one of the passengers had found it useful.

Edie pondered on this startling event for some time. What had made him act in such an unusually kind and respectful manner? Did he perhaps have sisters at home and that was why he took pity on them? In her grandpa's house, Edie had always admired a Japanese painting of ink on silk. Now she suddenly thought of the trees and birds and little ornate bridge in the painting, a boy standing on the bridge and a mountain behind. She had often studied it, and once she had tried herself to unsuccessfully recreate the delicate strokes of the brush that had made that image. She hadn't connected such art with her Japanese captors, but now she tried to reconcile something so beautiful with what she had seen in the camps. Nothing really made sense, but that moment of humanity from the young guard made her wonder what his life was like before the war. In her mind, he became the boy on the bridge, living a happy and peaceful village existence. It struck her all at once that

anyone involved in a war was to be pitied, that war was bad for everyone. The revelation occupied her thoughts for many hours, and she wished she was sitting near enough to share it with Vivian.

At least the small children were interested in the journey down the river. Nothing grew in the camp at Lahat except the cassava they had been tending and never had a chance to harvest. Now the children were pointing at the trees and flowers on the riverbanks and at the Malay fishermen pulling nets. The sight of a goat was a highlight. Why did that animal have a tail under its chin?

As they approached the mouth of the river it was good to feel the sea breeze, and the passengers looked forward to the freshness of an ocean crossing. However, a storm was brewing. Soon the little steamer was creaking and groaning and heaving up and down, as huge waves swept over the deck. Screaming women clung to each other until the waves receded. Now the helmet had a new use as a receptacle for vomit.

Finally arriving at the wooden barracks camp at Muntok, they discovered it was much like the camp they had left, only it was newly built and with a bit more space, which was useful as more internees were brought from other camps and now there were seven hundred women

and children incarcerated there. Beyond the barbed wire of this camp, the jungle looked green and beautiful, and Edie watched colourful butterflies among the leaves and imagined they were fairies or guardian angels sent to watch over them. She showed them to Vivian to give her hope.

But Vivian was looking grave. 'They've cut our rations again. I'm afraid we are going to see more beri-beri.'

Vivian knew, but didn't want to tell Edie, that starvation coupled with beri-beri and the island fever was a deadly combination.

DIVIAN

BARRACKS CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, NOVEMBER 1944

The monsoon season arrived again, and the jungle disease known as Bangka Fever hit the camp bringing bursting headaches, raging temperatures and skin eruptions. Many were too weak to resist it and the cemetery outside the wire fence became very full.

Every time there was a death, the guards called for volunteers amongst the internees to dig the graves. Sometimes there might be several graves to dig in a day, with the clumsy mattocks on the muddy slope of a hill. How they longed for shovels. Those nurses still strong enough often volunteered; they felt bound to assist. It was also a relief to be outside the camp for a short while.

Their strength, however, was so depleted that even though none of the dead weighed very much, it was a struggle for six nurses to carry a coffin on long poles. The coffins were made by the women in the camp from slats

of wood crudely nailed together, and the nurses liked to fill them with flowers to cover the body inside. They put on their stained and worn uniforms for burials, to give some dignity to the occasion. They held a short service and placed a wooden cross; they were sad little crosses, but at least the place the dead women lay in was green and verdant and peaceful.

‘We’ve another burial to prepare today, I’m afraid.’

Vivian had finished a shift at the makeshift ‘hospital’, where the sick lay on a bamboo platform above the dirt floor. Betty gave her a pat on the shoulder.

‘Just about the only thing we can do for many people, now. Is it the young mum?’

Vivian nodded sadly. Jessie knew how it felt to see the women with young children die.

‘Not another one who gave her rice rations to her kids?’

‘We tried force feeding her, but it was too late.’

Everyone sat silent, downcast. The mothers had denied themselves food for so long they were unable to respond any more.

Blanche was first to speak. ‘Damn! Damn! Bloody hell! Bloody damnation!’

Iole sighed. ‘And all we can do is sponge their foreheads and try to make them comfortable. But at least they don’t

die alone.’

Vivian was feeling particularly haunted by this death.

‘It was so strange, just before she died, there was this movement on the mat all around her. It made my skin crawl.’

Wilma knew at once what she meant.

‘I’ve seen that — a mass of moving black ...’

Jessie gasped. ‘Not ...? No! Not *lice*?’

Wilma nodded. ‘Yep, afraid so — leaving their host and looking for another.’

They were all struck with the horror of it. Blanche attempted a joke,

‘Lice, cockroaches, rats, bedbugs, mosquitoes, snakes ... welcome to camping on rainy Bangka!’

Vivian sat curled up with her head on her knees.

‘I really don’t know if I can do this burial ... I just can’t face it. I don’t think I can go on anymore!’

The others exchanged looks — they knew about these moments of despair.

Betty spoke gently. ‘We must go on, Viv.’

Blanche tried an encouraging tone. ‘You’re down in the dumps and no surprise, join the club; but you’ll rally, mate.’

‘I shouldn’t even be here. I should be on the beach with the others. I should have died with them!’

The others were anxious and perplexed. Vivian was usually the cheerful one amongst them. Blanche spoke in a low voice to Wilma,

‘Tough seeing her spit the dummy.’

‘She’s been through too much. Just give her a breather.’ Wilma crouched beside Vivian. ‘You need to sit this one out, Viv. We can all help carry the lass to the cemetery.’

Wilma didn’t often join in with the coffin bearing because of her bad back. But she knew when someone was at the end of their tether — it happened to them all sooner or later and you never knew what might bring it on, what would feel like the final straw.

Betty spoke up, ‘You sit with Bully, Wilma, we can manage. A rest will do you both good.’

It may have been the rest, or it may have been the fellowship, but Vivian soon rallied.

EDIE

BARRACKS CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, DECEMBER 1944

When Edie looked at the emaciated women around her, she realised she must look the same. Her clothes were now in tattered rags and on her feet she wore leaves tied around with jungle vines.

She was used to the deaths in the camp now, and she no longer spoke to the small, hungry animal in her stomach, but she was very concerned about the nurses. They all suffered from malaria, but they mostly managed to carry on with their duties. Edie watched Vivian anxiously.

No-one had the energy to celebrate Christmas much this year, but 18 December was Vivian's birthday and Edie managed to put together a bunch of jungle flowers as a present. Vivian was very touched.

Edie knew she was worrying about Betty who was very sick with Bangka fever.

'You've found some dillenia, Little Bet, see — these large

white flowers, they're Betty's favourites, they remind her of magnolias.'

Edie didn't know that Betty had requested dillenia for her coffin. In fact, Betty survived, and Edie was very happy for Vivian, but then other nurses started dying and she was anxious again. She clutched Hank and prayed fiercely every night that her very best friend in the world would stay well.

VIVIAN

**BARRACKS CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND,
FEBRUARY–MARCH 1945**

Mina Raymont died in February of cerebral malaria. The excruciating pain from her swollen and infected brain meant she screamed for hours, even though she was unconscious. They buried her amongst the most beautiful flowers they could find, remembering how she missed the roses in her garden.

But the biggest shock to all the nurses was when Blanche became bedridden with malnutrition and beri-beri.

Blanche always seemed the toughest, her larrikin streak and humour had kept them smiling in the darkest of times. Now she looked blue and swollen with fluid, and Vivian knew the disease was weakening her heart.

Her friends sat around her, listening to her difficult breathing. They took turns holding her hand, and they talked together softly. They talked of the day they would

be set free and how they would celebrate; they would drink a long glass of cool lemonade, they would lie in a scented bath, they would sit in the shade and read a romantic novel; Vivian would play a leisurely game of tennis.

Vivian smiled, 'At least we can still use our imagination!'

Jessie looked around. 'Sometimes I wonder if all this is real. Maybe we're just imagining it ...'

They were surprised when Blanche opened her eyes. Her voice was very weak but unmistakably Blanche.

'Crikey! My imagination's not that blinking good!'

Even now she could make them laugh.

'We thought you were asleep, Blanche.'

'No time for that,' came the reply.

The others exchanged looks; they knew what she meant. Her time was near, and she was readying herself.

After a little while she said, 'Sorry to be a nuisance.'

They told her she had never been a nuisance in her life, in fact, she had kept them all going with her wonderful humour.

'Sorry it's taking me so long to die.'

It was 19 March 1945, and they had been prisoners for three years when Blanche died.

EDIE

BARRACKS CAMP, BANGKA ISLAND, APRIL 1945

On 8 April, the camp was moved again. Everyone wondered how many would survive the journey. Edie knew Vivian was sad because young nurse Shirley Gardam had died only four days earlier. Vivian had reminisced about the singalongs with Shirley at the piano in the early days at Palembang. Edie thought what a long time ago that seemed.

She was now seventeen years old, but sometimes it felt to Edie as though she had missed adolescence completely and jumped straight to an adult, weary of life. When Edie said it aloud, Vivian spoke brightly.

‘You have all your life before you, so many experiences to look forward to, and I’m going to make sure you get them, Little Bet.’

Edie felt that if anyone could do that for her it would be Vivian.

They were to journey back again to Sumatra. From her

place on the old coastal steamer moored at Muntok, Edie watched Vivian and other nurses walk back and forward carrying stretchers with the sick down the long jetty and gently landing them on board. She saw them go to fetch one stretcher load and then stop and lower it back to the ground. They bent down and started scraping a shallow hole in the mud. The woman on the stretcher had died while waiting to be carried. The guards just watched as the nurses hastily buried the woman, recited the Lord's Prayer, then returned for the next stretcher. Edie felt for Hank in her pocket and held him close.

The sea crossing that she dreaded was thankfully calm, but during the crossing several more women died, and their bodies were rolled over the side into the sea by the passengers with a quiet prayer. Upriver again next day at Palembang, they were crowded into train carriages thick with black coal dust. There they waited as the heat of the day grew. Edie felt as if she were cooking in an oven, but she didn't imagine that her skinny frame would make anyone a good meal. When night came at last, the mosquitoes proved her wrong. It was still stifling, and the stench of unwashed bodies and dysentery was hideous.

Next morning the train suddenly jerked, and they were on their way west towards the mountains. Edie looked out

of the window at the slowly passing Sumatran countryside, but she was too exhausted to notice much. When they finally reached their destination, they had been travelling for thirty-four hours. Loaded into trucks, they were driven along a bumpy dirt road.

VIVIAN

BELALAU CAMP, SUMATRA, APRIL–MAY 1945

The very rough, makeshift camp hidden in the jungle had been a former rubber plantation. It seemed to rain all the time; the ground became a quagmire and in their leaky roofed huts, with the sides open to the elements, the internees were never dry. The only place to obtain water was a small creek, where they must also wash in full view of the guards. Vivian was utterly exhausted by the journey and setting up again in this new place.

Can I really go on? she thought. Do I have the strength?

Vivian knew it was her promise to the ghosts of her murdered friends that kept her going. She had to survive to tell their story. But she felt every day as if she were sleepwalking. The nurses agreed this was the most primitive of all the camps so far, but Vivian was almost beyond caring.

Until, that is, one day in May, Edie was brought to

the nurses semi-conscious, desperately ill with fever and dysentery. As thunder rumbled overhead, Vivian brought water from the stream to wash the girl's thin body and watched over her every moment, feeding her extra rice and a little sweet potato from her own ration and holding tightly to her hand as if to keep her there. If she had believed she was beyond feeling, she now knew this was far from the truth.

Vivian was desperately anxious. She whispered to Edie, 'You can't leave. The stars will miss you. The flowers will miss you. The fireflies will miss you. I will miss you!'

As she tried to reassure Grandma Lillian that her step-granddaughter would survive, Vivian prayed that Edie's youth would help her, but without drugs she knew there was little she could do for her but wait.

EDIE

BELALAU CAMP, SUMATRA, MAY-JUNE 1945

Everything seemed very far away. It was too hard to open her eyes, and if she tried the light hurt too much. She was burning and drenched with sweat ... she was shivering, and her teeth chattered relentlessly. Her head throbbed and her body ached. Dimly, she was aware of Vivian by her side; faintly, she could hear her speaking; in her head she answered, but her voice didn't seem to work. She wanted to tell her that she was standing on the edge of the tin mine near where her grandpa lived — her grandpa was there beside her, she couldn't see him, but she could feel him there. They were looking into the huge dirt pit, and he was pointing out the small figures of the workers pushing their wooden carts up the walkways below them. Only it wasn't the workers she could see, but the choir. She leaned to look. Grandpa was holding her hand and she must not let go or she might fall in. It was very hot and humid, and she

wished the choir would come closer, but they never seemed to. She wished they would start to sing so that Grandpa would hear them, and she wished Grandpa would bring her a drink, but she knew she must not let go of Grandpa's hand. He was calling her name and she must never let go of his hand ...

When Edie opened her eyes, it was dark. She found it difficult to focus but she knew at once it was Vivian holding her hand so tightly, Vivian calling her name. Even in the dark she knew Vivian was smiling. She knew then she was safe. Vivian was smiling and everything would be alright. She closed her eyes again.

Vivian was smiling because the fever was subsiding. She slept beside Edie, and when she woke next morning Edie was already awake, pale and hollow eyed but able to sip some water.

'Will the choir sing again? I wish I could hear the choir.'

Vivian had to tell her gently that Miss Dryburgh had recently died. There would be no more choir. However, said Vivian, they could still imagine it together. They would never forget the beauty of that music.

Edie was weak and wobbly for a few days, but she was back with a relieved Grandma Lillian and doing well when she went to find Vivian. She was met by Wilma. To her

horror, she heard from Wilma that Vivian was now gravely ill.

Through her tears, Edie asked if Vivian might die. Wilma couldn't pretend. 'I'm afraid there's every likelihood.'

This could not, **MUST** not happen! Edie would not tolerate it, and she replaced her tears with a steely resolve. 'What can I do? I want to help; how can I help?'

Wilma and Betty saw how determined she was. Perhaps, they said, she could try and get hold of some limes. They knew that it was highly unlikely limes could be found around the camp and if they were, they would be very expensive and none of them had anything left with which to barter.

Edie, however, had an idea. She spoke to one of the women in the camp who spoke some Japanese and learned the Japanese word for the 'lime fruit'. Then she hurried to the wire fence in a place where she would be partly concealed by a hut, took off her gold bangle and cleaned away the mud until it glinted in the sun. She waited for a particular young guard to walk by as he patrolled just outside the wire.

After the surprising event with the helmet on the boat, Edie had been watching the guards more closely, learning better to distinguish between them. She had seen the

young Japanese soldier whose helmet must have been returned much the worse for wear. He now patrolled every day around the perimeter. She had wondered if he had got into trouble for that kind gesture on the boat, but he looked unharmed.

Now she waited by the wire, afraid but determined, for a chance to speak to him.

When he approached, she bowed low, holding her breath. When she dared look up, he had stopped outside the fence, and before she could lose her nerve she spoke urgently,

‘Raimu kudamono, raimu kudamono!’

She mimed someone very ill and then showed him the gold bangle, repeating her request over and over.

The young man nodded, and looked around to make sure no-one was watching. To her surprise he said in English, ‘Tomorrow,’ then walked quickly away.

Edie was on tenterhooks for the rest of the day and could scarcely sleep that night. She paced up and down outside the ‘hospital’ hut, willing Vivian to keep going. When morning came, Edie was up early, waiting in the quiet place by the wire, hoping to look inconspicuous and praying her mission would be successful.

The moment the young guard arrived, he took a wooden

box from the bushes and rolled a dozen small but fresh limes under the wire. Edie quickly passed him the bangle. For a moment they stared at each other and she saw how pinched his face looked. His dark eyes were hooded and very solemn. She realised they were probably about the same age. She bowed briefly saying, '*Arigato*,' and bent to gather up the limes. When she looked up, he was gone.

Vivian was in the hospital for many weeks, but she recovered. Wilma told Edie the limes had made a real difference, and Edie was immensely proud when Vivian said,

'You helped save my life, Little Bet.'

Vivian was sad that Edie had to lose her mother's bangle, but Edie wasn't sad. The bond between her and Vivian was now as golden and shining as any bangle.

VIVIAN

BELALAU CAMP, SUMATRA, JULY–AUGUST 1945

Vivian recovered, but when she walked out of the hospital hut and looked around her, she saw only skeleton women, emaciated as herself, in rags with all the hope gone from their eyes. Only Little Bet seemed confident that they could pull through. Other women and nurses were dying every day, and everyone made a will, bequeathing the one or two possessions they had to others. Even if the war ended, would anyone come and rescue them in this far-away place deep in the jungle? Did anyone even know where they were?

This camp seemed to be the place where the women finally accepted that they could go on no longer, their fellowship may not be enough to sustain them, and this was likely to be their final resting place. One of the youngest nurses, Win Davis from New South Wales, whom the older nurses had always sought to protect, died quietly. Vivian

counted heads. Now there were only twenty-four nurses left, and their health was very precarious.

Vivian was composing in her mind a final letter for her family when Edie joined her and asked if she were daydreaming. When Vivian explained, Edie was appalled. She looked at Vivian. Her nose was beaky in her gaunt face, her hair, which had started falling out when she was ill, was cropped very short. Only the blue eyes were a reminder of the woman she had been when they first met, and they were filled with tears. Edie could not bear it.

‘No!’ she shouted. ‘We got sick, and we didn’t die! We are meant to live and get out of here, I know it, I absolutely know it, I won’t let you give up. We are going to go home and be friends forever!’

Vivian had to smile at the fierce expression on the girl’s thin face and the squaring of her narrow shoulders. The spark of life that was Little Bet lifted her spirits, and for the first time in weeks she dared again to imagine going home. She wasn’t sure that it was hope, but it was a determination to get through one more day.

In fact, unbeknownst to them, the war had already ended. There were only a few more days to get through.

EDIE AND DIVIAN

BELALAU CAMP, SUMATRA, 24 AUGUST 1945

The guards came with big sticks and ordered everyone into the compound. For several days the women had been aware of some commotion in the Japanese quarters. Something was afoot, and now they waited anxiously to hear what was next in store for them. Another move? That would surely be the death of them all in their fragile state. Those that could stand supported each other and prayed it would not take too long.

Captain Seiki with bloodshot eyes and his uniform tight over a well-fed belly came to address them. In English he announced, 'The war is over. Now we can all be friends.'

There was complete silence. The captain was evidently surprised, he had expected cheering. Instead, the internees all stared at him with blank expressions. Confused, he continued, 'Now there is peace, we will all be leaving. If we have made any mistakes in the past, we hope you will

forgive us.’

Still there was silence. ‘Mistakes.’ The word rang in incredulous ears. Captain Seiki looked around at the sullen glares and quickly strode away.

Firstly, there were tears. Grandma Lillian cried, many women and nurses cried – whether from relief, anger at the lost years, grief for lost loved ones, Edie wasn’t sure, but tears preceded cheers and laughter.

When they realised that by the time they were informed about the ending of the war, it had, in fact, already been over for nine days, Vivian felt consternation. They assumed the Allies had won, but they didn’t even know that for certain. How would anyone find them? People were still sick and could still die before they were rescued. Then something extraordinary happened.

The guards opened the storehouse and told the nurses they could help themselves. To their astonishment they found food and medicines and Red Cross parcels that were never distributed, enough to have kept them all alive. This was welcome but also painful beyond words. This had been deliberate cruelty, no ‘mistake’ here. Edie never saw the young guard again and she was glad of that. She felt that knowing the guards had let so many women die needlessly, it would be too difficult to think of him now with any kind

of empathy. Not today. Maybe later. Maybe one day she would have another beautiful silk painting, but for now there was only the confusion of sorrow and relief. Edie sat under a tree and cried.

A few days later, the male internees were brought from their neighbouring camp and reunited with the women. On both sides they were scarcely recognisable. Vivian and Edie watched as men and women wept with joy to find one another, while others wept with sorrow to find their loved ones had died. Small children looked fearfully at strange fathers and brothers they didn't remember.

At least now there was food and medicine enough to keep everyone going until rescue. As Vivian and Edie watched the reunions, they could smile at each other and promise to always be friends, always. Friendship forged in hell that had blossomed despite hardship — that bond could never be broken.

EDIE AND VIVIAN

BELALAU CAMP, SUMATRA, 11 SEPTEMBER 1945

The nurses were the first to leave the camp. After three and a half years in captivity, they were overwhelmed when a tall Australian Major and two Australian Sergeants walked through the gate. Vivian felt she had never seen anything more wonderful.

As Japanese camps were being liberated by the Allies, and inmates and guards interviewed, rumours had arisen in army circles that nursing sisters were being kept somewhere in Sumatra in a remote and secret jungle location. It had taken some sleuthing, but Major Jacobs had been determined to find where the nurses were hidden. He was very relieved to see them, but was shocked by their emaciated and forlorn appearance, all suffering from malaria as they shuffled and limped along with feverish eyes and yellow skin stretched across their bones. His orders were to take them to Singapore. There, they could

be nursed themselves while recuperating before returning to Australia. As the nurses struggled aboard the trucks to take them to the airfield, wearing the ragged, stained uniforms they had preserved so carefully, they knew they could at last truthfully look forward to hot baths, pretty nightdresses, clean sheets and comfortable beds.

When Vivian had farewelled Edie, the girl's dark eyes had looked long into the blue eyes of 'her nurse.' They spoke of the wonderful moments they had shared and the times to come when they would meet again to remember them together. Edie tried hard to wave cheerfully as the army trucks left, and her skinny arm held aloft was Vivian's last sight of the camp as they drove away.

Edie shed tears over the separation, but she herself did not have to wait for long to leave.

Soon the civilians were also collected in order to be airlifted to Singapore. When the plane took off at last, Edie looked down at the jungle treetops below. She thought of all the little crosses in the jungle and of Vivian's friends on Radji Beach. As the plane ascended, the music of the Largo sounded again in her head, and she imagined Grandpa and all the souls of the people they had lost soaring with the music up into the blue sky around them.

They were going home.

AFTER

There is a beach.

A sunlit, peaceful beach.

Lieutenant-Colonel Vivian Bullwinkel stands with a bunch of flowers at the water's edge. She stands on Radji Beach with the memorial to the nurses behind her and throws the flowers into the water, where they drift gently in and out on the waves, as she drifted all those years ago.

Vivian spent much of her life ensuring the nurses who died on that beach will not be forgotten. She testified at the War Crimes Tribunal in 1946. She and Wilma Oram travelled around Australia raising money to commemorate them. 'Pestering people,' Vivian said. She became a Director of Nursing and received an MBE, and in 1973 she led a party of nurses to rescue orphans from the Vietnam War.

Vivian and Edie remained friends. Edie became a teacher,

and many years later, both now living in Perth, Western Australia, Vivian and Edie would get together to talk and laugh at Hank the Mouse, which Edie kept with her always.

Edie said Vivian was the best thing that happened to her in the camps. 'She taught me the value of friendship, she is the person in all the world I feel most comfortable with. I'd feel lost without her. She means the world to me, my friend Vivian.'

THE NURSES

On 12 February 1942, sixty-five Australian Army Nursing Service nurses were evacuated from Singapore. Only twenty-four survived to return home to Australia.

NURSES LOST AT SEA

Louvinia Bates

Ellenor Calnan

Mary Dorothea Clarke

Millicent ('Millie') Dorsch

Caroline Mary Ennis

Kathleen Kinsella

Gladys McDonald

Olive Dorothy Paschke

Lavinia Jean Russell

Marjorie Schuman

Annie Merle Trenerry

Mona Wilton

NURSES OF THE BANGKA ISLAND MASSACRE

Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy
Alma May Beard
Ada Joyce Bridge
Florence Casson
Mary Beth Cuthbertson
Irene Drummond
Dorothy Gwendoline ('Buddy') Elmes
Lorna Florence Fairweather
Peggy Everett Farmaner
Clarice Isobel Halligan
Nancy Harris
Minnie Hodgson
Ellen Louisa ('Nell') Keats
Janet ('Jenny') Kerr
Mary Eleanor ('Ellie') McGlade
Kathleen Neuss
Florence Aubin Salmon
Esther Sarah Jean ('Stewie') Stewart
Mona Margaret Anderson Tait
Rosetta Joan Wight
Bessie Wilmott

PRISONER OF WAR DEATHS

Winnie May Davis

Dot Freeman

Shirley Gardam

Blanche Hempsted

Gladys Hughes

Pearl Mittelheuser

Mina Raymont

Rene Singleton

PRISONER OF WAR SURVIVORS

Jean Ashton
Pat Blake
Jessie Blanch
Vivian Bullwinkel
Veronica Clancy
Cecilia Delforce
Jess Doyle
Jean Greer
Pat Gunther
Mavis Hannah
Iole Harper
Nesta James
Betty Jeffrey
Violet McElnea
Sylvia Muir
Wilma Oram
Chris Oxley
Eileen Short
Jessie Simons
Val Smith
Ada Syer
Florence Trotter
Joyce Tweddell
Beryl Woodbridge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Surrey, England, Jenny Davis 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.

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The work done by the Australian College of Nursing Foundation to celebrate Vivian Bullwinkel AM has cemented her place in history. The statue of Vivian they commissioned and installed at the Australian War Memorial in 2023 has created a great deal of interest in her story, the twenty-one nurses that lost their lives in the Bangka Island massacre, and the role of the nurses in World War II.

In fact, there have been a great many women over the years who have striven to keep the memory of the nurses on Bangka Island in our minds, starting with Vivian herself and including the staff and pupils at the schools some of the nurses attended, and members of town and city councils around Australia. I have found all their work and research inspiring and motivating, and my thanks go to all the historians from all walks of life who endeavour to record the experiences of those who have gone before;

it is work that many writers depend upon, work from history enthusiasts like Kathryn and John Shapland from the wonderful Recollections of War Museum in Albany, Western Australia, and Marg Burridge from John Burridge Military Antiques in Perth. Both have provided me with assistance and impressed me with their passion for history and for the story of the nurses.

Then there are the books. I feel most fortunate that excellent books have been available to me that helped provide so much background and detail on the nurses, the prison camps, and World War II in South-East Asia. We stand on the shoulders of others and are constantly learning. I very much appreciated the detailed *Bullwinkel*, a biography by Norman G. Manners, that includes some of Vivian's own accounts; nurse Betty Jeffrey's autobiography of life alongside Vivian in the prison camps, *White Coolies*, and *Song of Survival* by Helen Coljin, a civilian in the same camps. Most recently, *The War Nurses* by Anthea Hodgson, and *Back to Bangka* by Georgina Banks, have vividly brought to life the story of those authors' own relatives, nurses who died on Bangka Island. All these stories deal with the horrendous experiences the women in this tale endured, but at the heart of them all is the value of friendship and love that gives the women their courage and endurance.

And, of course, there are the people. The families of the nurses that I have been able to interview have been so generous and supportive. I am always awed when people allow me to use their family stories, and very grateful for the details they provided that furnished the text. I thank them all for their kindness. There will be many families around Australia and elsewhere that I haven't spoken with, whose relatives appear in this book. I am proud to have walked a little while with their memory.

There are, of course, characters in the story that are not heroic. I acknowledge that in times of conflict, when loyalties are required, the notions of good and evil can appear black and white, when they may be shades of grey. But for those whose actions we cannot excuse, I believe we can at least remember that war damages everyone, the perpetrators of violence as well as the victims.

Writing is a solitary occupation, so the support and belief of others means a great deal. I am indebted to Alex Allan and Cate Sutherland from Fremantle Press, who instigated this book and had such faith in me. Particularly I thank Cate for her wonderful, very sensitive and elegant editing process, and illustrator Briony Stewart who so beautifully captured for the book cover a pivotal moment in the story that speaks of hope. Also, thank you to authors

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Before the idea of a book arose, I wrote a play on the same topic, *21 Hearts: Vivian Bullwinkel and the Nurses of the Vyner Brooke*, which led to this publication. My heartfelt thanks go to the board and everyone at THEATRE 180, particularly Rebecca Davis and Stuart Halusz who initiated the play, and to the wonderful donors and supporters who made it possible. Loving that project as I have, it was a great pleasure to revisit the nurses and Edie in a different discipline, and all the artists involved with the play have added insight to the story.

And, of course, a huge thank you to my nearest and dearest — to my children and grandchildren, to my sisters, and to my extended family. You provide the framework for my life and the implicit faith you have in my ability is never taken for granted.

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my sounding board, champion, first reader and gently discerning critic, who supports me through all endeavours and shares so many long-term memories and silly jokes, brings me cups of tea and doesn't complain (as much as he should) when I lose track of time.

Life is a journey and good company on a journey makes all the difference.

Jenny Davis
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