

75th Anniversary of the Banka Island Massacre

16th February 2017 @ Nurses Memorial Centre

The Story as told by Emily Malone (Betty Jeffries' niece) & John Bullwinkel (Vivian Bullwinkel's nephew) compiled by Lilian Leonard.

On the 12th February 1942, following the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, the hospital ship SS Vyner Brooke evacuated with 65 Australian Nurses on board. The next day the ship was attacked so headed towards the Banka Strait but was further bombed & the ship sank on the 14th, 12 nurses died or drowned at that time. Amongst the survivors, were 22 nurses the civilians walked to the nearest village where they were captured by the Japanese & became Prisoners of War, the male troops were led to the next cove by the Japanese; gunfire was heard & not seen again. Other survivors hid in the rushes & foliage on the beach. The 22 remaining Australian nurses were the last ashore as they tended the injured.

On the 16th February the Japanese commanded these 22 nurses & one female civilian to walk into the sea, where they were machine gunned down, the average age of these nurses was 29. Vivian Bullwinkel was the only survivor, she faked death & when the Japanese had moved on she emerged from the sea. She had been shot through her left lower hip/thigh; fortunately the bullet went right through. Vivian moved to the rushes where she collapsed sleeping for over 24 hours, she met a British soldier (former rat of Tobruk survivor) who also was injured but unfortunately he died. Three days later Vivian walked out, was captured, taken to Muntok Jail, this is where she met Betty Jeffries, of 'White Coolies' fame. Vivian told Betty of the massacre of the nurses & they made a pact never to talk about "The Girls on the Beach" while they were P.O.Ws. Three & a half years later on their return to Australia both Vivian & Betty were amazed to find the Massacre of Banka Island was known.

Vivian visited all the families of the 22 nurses who were killed, some of these relatives were present, and it was quite moving to hear their stories.

John Bullwinkel then told the audience a little about his Aunt's life post WW2. I personally met Vivian when I was a trainee nurse at Fairfield Hospital in 1957, she was Matron, very strict & unapproachable to the student nurses, in retrospect was it because all those years as a P.O.W she never talked of the loss of her nursing colleagues on Banka Island & no counseling. She probably suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In 1969 Vivian visited Muntok Jail; she lived in Melbourne until her marriage to Colonel Frank Strachan in 1977. moving to Perth. In 1995 she suffered a stroke but survived that to be able to attend the launch of the ADF Nurses memorial in Canberra in 1999. Vivian passed away on 3rd July 2000, may she REST IN PEACE.