

Death Railway

TOURS

Witness to Mass Murder

Army Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel survived a Japanese atrocity and 3.5 years of captivity.

She came close to spending the war as a civilian as she was rejected as a RAAF Nurse because they said she had flat feet.

Bullwinkel then 26, was instead accepted into the Australian Army Nursing Service in 1941 (the RAAF's loss I say) and was among the last servicewomen to flee Singapore before the fall on 15 Feb 1942. She sailed off on the Vyner Brooke as one of the last ships to leave Keppell Harbour.

Later bombers sank the ship and she clung to a lifeboat; drifting ashore eight hours later with 21 other nurses at Radjii Beach on Banka Island, where they were joined by a large contingent of civilians and Allied soldiers. They elected to surrender and expected to be interned as POWs by the Japanese.

Instead Japanese soldiers took all the men around a headland and shot and bayoneted them to death; the 22 nurses were then ordered to wade into the water, where the Japanese machine gunned them. It was reported that blood was still dripping from the Japanese Arisaka Rifles when the girls were approached and shepherded into the sea.

"The conduct of all the girls was most courageous," Bullwinkel, the sole survivor recalled.



AWM P03960.001



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

AWM P04585.003

P04585.003

Death Railway



Above Left – studio portrait of Vivian Bullwinkel (AWM PO3960.001) and right Vivian at the War Crimes Trials post war. (AWM PO4585.003).

“They knew what was going to happen to them but no one panicked; they just marched ahead with their chins up.”

Bullwinkel was shot above the hip and the bullet passed through her body; she feigned death, pretending to be dead with the other girls and later washed up on shore.

“I lay there 10 minutes and everything seemed quiet. Then I got up and went up in the jungle and lay down and either slept or was unconscious for a couple of days.”

She survived 12 days with a wounded British Soldier (Private Cecil Kingsley) until the two surrendered – she must have had some of her own personal panic on that second surrender; it would have been terrifying for her. The British Private Kingsley died of his wounds not long after their capture.

She was interned with other nurses and civilian women where their story was part of the subject matter for Bruce Beresford’s 1997 film Paradise Road. Some of the extras in that film were taken from RAAF Base Butterworth at the time.

Source: The Australian Newspaper and AWM.