Bangka, the Indonesian island haunted by a massacre

70 years ago this month, a group of Australian nurses fleeing war-torn Singapore were shipwrecked on an island occupied by Japanese forces. Alison Ripley tells their story.

![Never forgotten: the memorial to the Australian nurses who were shipwrecked on Bangka island Photo: Alison Ripley](image)

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It was lunchtime on a Sunday and the beach was teeming with life. There were people fishing while children played tag, running around the rusty hulks that litter this foreshore. Under the shade of the trees, families were eating and talking. The main topic of conversation that day, as our Indonesian guide told us later, was what had brought two Westerners to a remote island off the coast of Sumatra, seldom visited by tourists.

We were there, my friend Sarah and I, to research a play we are developing, after reading Ian W Shore’s book about a group of remarkable Australian women. In 2010 we met in Canberra, travelling from Sydney and Melbourne so that we could research the story further in the archives of the Australian War Memorial. We felt enormously privileged to able to read the notes, cards and letters home written by a group of lively expat women, who had left their homes so willingly to serve their country.

On the February 12 1942, 65 Australian nurses left Singapore on SS Vyner Brooke. Out of the
47 ships that fled during those last chaotic days before the Fall of Singapore, only five made it to safety. The rest, including the Vyner Brooke, were bombed and sunk by Japanese aircraft. 12 of the nurses were lost at sea while the remaining 53 swam or clung to life rafts. They washed up on various parts of Bangka Island, which by mid-February had been taken over by the Japanese.

What struck us as we approached the old lighthouse near Muntok, which had guided those shipwrecked survivors, was that that the place as described all those years ago was eerily similar to the way it is today.

By the morning of the February 16, there were around 90 survivors gathered on this beach. They included allied servicemen, stretcher cases, civilians and 22 of the Australian nurses. A delegation set off for the nearest village, accompanied by the civilian women and children. They were intercepted by a Japanese patrol, which refused their surrender. The civilians were told to walk into Muntok but the others were marched back to the beach.

The able-bodied servicemen was the first group to be taken behind the headland and killed. The Japanese soldiers then returned and set up a machine-gun. Along with one elderly British civilian, who had refused to leave her wounded husband, the nurses were ordered to walk into the sea and then shot. Then it was the turn of the stretcher cases, one of whom included a British soldier, Private Patrick Kingsley.

Although suffering from terrible injuries, Kingsley survived and so did one nurse, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel. Shot in the hip, the bullet went straight through her, missing her vital organs. Vivian lay in the shallows for up to two days, where the salt water cleaned her wounds.

Vivian tended to Kingsley’s wounds, making bandages out of what she could find. And Kingsley, in turn gave Vivian the moral support she needed, after all that she had witnessed. They soon headed into the jungle.

Neither Kingsley nor Vivian would have survived as long as they did, were it not for another group of courageous women. Vivian went to the nearest village to beg for food and each time the village headman turned her away, fearing Japanese reprisals. As she was walking back along the path, a local woman beckoned to her and quietly handed over food parcels of rice, fish and vegetables. Every time she returned to the village, the women, in defiance of their headman, gave Vivian food.

After 12 days, Vivian had to break the news to Kingsley that if they were to stand any chance of survival they should give themselves up. To her surprise, Kingsley agreed. But he had one last request and that was to wait one more day, as he wanted to spend his 39th birthday as a free man.
By then Kingsley could barely walk but he was determined to accompany Vivian. Leaning on each other for support the two of them hobbled off, not knowing what fate awaited them. They had concocted a story about a shipwreck. Kingsley reminded Vivian to sling her water bottle over her hip to disguise the tell-tale bullet holes in her uniform. Luckily this was enough to fool their Japanese captors. Kingsley was put into the men’s camp at Muntok but died a few days later, after one last goodbye with Vivian.

At the women’s camp, Vivian was overjoyed to be re-united with the other group of 24 Australian nurses, who had failed to make it to the lighthouse, and had been swept away to land on another part of the island, where they were rounded up and taken to a makeshift prisoner-of-war camp.

For the three-and-a-half years held in captivity, where another eight nurses died from disease or malnutrition, Vivian and her closest friends kept her story secret. Out of the original group of 65, only 24 returned home to Australia.

Vivian went on to a distinguished career, running hospitals and nursing training in Australia. She never forgot those local women who had fed her and Kingsley, and she set up, in their honour, a study programme for women from the region to train as nurses in Australia.

As we picked our way carefully along the beach, we felt a deep sense of sadness at seeing all the old wrecks, the remains of some of those bombed ships. It was a stark reminder of how much we owe to those who served during this particularly dark period of our history. At the memorial to the 65 nurses, we stood together, silently acknowledging their courage. We came away with a renewed sense of resolve to ensure their story is not forgotten.