

Sister Betty Jeffrey

We are praying for our freedom. If this doesn't happen soon we shall be a mess for the rest of our lives.

Betty Jeffrey, *White coolies: a graphic record of survival in World War Two*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1997, p. 148.



Captain Vivian Bullwinkel (left) and Lieutenant Betty Jeffrey at a dedication ceremony to the fallen of the Second World War, 1950. AWM P04585.001

Agnes Betty Jeffrey

Agnes Betty Jeffrey was born in Hobart on 14 May 1908, the second youngest child of six. As a child, Betty and her family moved often because of her father's job. An accountant at the General Post Office, he was often transferred interstate. Agnes came to dislike her first name, preferring to be called Betty. After many years of travelling, the family finally settled in East Malvern, Victoria, the town Jeffrey would call home for the rest of her life. As part of a large family, she was surrounded by the singing and laughter of her siblings. She quickly learnt how to make clothing and food spread a little further, and knew what it

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meant to “do your bit”. She didn’t realise that the basic life skills she had learned as a child would one day help to save her life.

Sister Jeffrey

At the age of 29, Jeffrey began nursing training at Melbourne’s Alfred Hospital. She had not been happy with other hospitals, so had put off her training for many years. Nevertheless, in 1939, she graduated with her General Nursing Certificate, and in 1940, while at the Royal Women’s Hospital, she received her midwifery certificate. That same year, at the age of 32, Jeffrey volunteered for the AANS, excited by the opportunity to travel and aid the war effort.

Following a posting to Darley Military Camp in Victoria, Jeffrey embarked for Malaya on board the *Zealandia* in May 1941, to join the 2/10th AGH. At this stage, the Pacific war had not yet broken out, but that all changed on 8 December: the nurses were now, in Jeffrey’s words, “in the thick of it”.

The nurses were soon evacuated to Singapore, where they converted an old school into a hospital. Here they worked tirelessly for weeks, nursing the sick and the wounded. But danger soon found them. Air raids became a daily occurrence, and on 13 February the nurses were instructed to evacuate. Initially the women refused, not wanting to abandon their patients, but orders were orders:

Our refusal was useless. We were ordered to leave and had to walk out on those superb fellows. All needed attention. I have never felt worse about anything. This was the work we had gone overseas to do.

Jeffrey, White coolies, p. 2.

Taking only what they could carry, and donning their red capes as a symbol of their peaceful purpose, Jeffrey and 64 of her nursing colleagues boarded a small privately owned ship, the *Vyner Brooke*, along with 300 civilians and soldiers. A fierce air raid was raging, and the nurses each silently prayed that this would be the end of the danger.

But it was just the beginning.

Two days out of Singapore, the *Vyner Brooke* was attacked by Japanese aircraft. After a couple of near misses, a bomb hit the ship's bridge. The nurses ensured that everyone was safely off the vessel and into life boats before they themselves abandoned ship. Some of them accompanied the civilians in boats and on rafts, while others, including Jeffrey, jumped overboard and prepared to swim for it. She turned to take one last look at the burning vessel, and watched as it quickly disappeared below the surface of the water. She heard their matron, Olive Paschke, call out, "We'll all meet on the shore, girls."

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She never saw her again.



Staff Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel, AANS, in service dress uniform, Melbourne, May 1941. AWM P03960.001

A prisoner of war

After three days in the water, Betty and her companion, Matron Iole Harper, were finally pulled from the water, exhausted and delirious, by Malay fishermen. They were taken to Japanese-held Banka Island, off Sumatra, where they were soon taken prisoner.

As the two women were taken to the camp where they were to be held, they were relieved to see some of their comrades from the *Vyner Brooke*. But their smiles soon faded as they realised that 34 others were still missing. Where were Matron Paschke and the girls who had been with her?

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Unbeknown to them, 12 of these women, including Matron Paschke, had been lost at sea. The fate of the remaining 22 was revealed when a tired and bedraggled Vivian Bullwinkel joined the camp just days later. She had been one of the nurses who had made it to shore on Banka Island with a number of civilians and soldiers. There they encountered Japanese troops, and only Bullwinkel survived.

Jeffrey and her colleagues were held prisoner in and around Sumatra for three and a half years. They lived in appalling conditions on a diet of bug-ridden rice and rotten vegetables. Many of the nurses had only the clothes on their backs – and no shoes, having removed them before diving off the *Vyner Brooke*. Their treatment by prison guards was often cruel. Some nurses had to walk for hours to collect clean water for the guards' crops of sweet potatoes, while they themselves were forced to drink water that was often putrid and contaminated. Red Cross parcels carrying food and medical supplies were also kept from the prisoners.

Soldiering on

To cope with these circumstances, Jeffrey and her friends attempted to establish a routine. Each woman was designated as a cook, a cleaner, or a gardener. To keep their spirits up, a choir was established and music was written. They also performed skits and played cards.



A soft doll the nurses made to represent a Japanese guard nicknamed “Bully”. It was made from a khaki shirt-tail (stolen from a Japanese soldier) with other fabric and leather scraps. It was given to Sister Jeffrey on her birthday in 1944. AWM REL/11877

The nurses made the most of what little they had, fashioning toys and clothes out of old rags. They drew with, and on, whatever they could find. Throughout her imprisonment Jeffrey kept a diary. She used an old exercise book she had found and a small stub of pencil. She kept this record of her experiences hidden; if it had been found, she would have been harshly punished.

By the time Jeffrey and her friends were set free, there were only 23 left of the original 32 nurses who had been taken prisoner. Jeffrey returned to Australia an emaciated shadow of her former self. Weighing just 32 kilograms and suffering from tuberculosis in her lungs, she spent two years in hospital, and for a long time afterwards had to have injections of cortisone.



Jeffrey (centre) and Sister Jenny Greer talking to an Australian soldier in a hospital in Malaya in 1945. The sisters were recovering from malnutrition. AWM 305369

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Nurses Memorial Centre

When Jeffrey returned home, she and Bullwinkel travelled around Australia raising funds for a memorial to honour nurses who had died in Sumatra. The Nurses Memorial Centre, a “living memorial” to Australian nurses who had died in all wars, opened in Melbourne in 1950. Betty was its first administrator, and then its patron from 1986 until her death in 2000.

For more information:

www.nursesmemorialcentre.org.au/

For Betty’s enlistment forms:

<http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=6120132>

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Activities

Read Jeffrey's story, above. Use this information to write your own story or short play highlighting the Australian nurses' experiences as prisoners of war.

Imagine you are a prisoner-of-war nurse in Sumatra. Write a diary entry or letter telling of your experiences. What would you say? What would you leave out?

Remember to consider that Japanese guards read mail and prisoners were not allowed to keep a journal (they could be punished if it was found). What wouldn't you want to tell your family? Would you really want them to know what you were going through? Why/why not?

The Geneva Convention of 1929 was a set of rules established to ensure the safety of medical staff and other non-combatants.

Article nine of the Geneva Convention reads in part:

*The personnel charged exclusively with the removal, transportation, and treatment of the wounded and sick, as well as with the administration of sanitary formations and establishments, and the chaplains attached to armies, shall be respected and protected under all circumstances. If they fall into the hands of the enemy they shall not be treated as prisoners of war. (Quoted in Jan Bassett, *Guns and brooches*, p. 141)*

In Betty Jeffrey's story, how were nurses who were prisoners of war treated? Does this obey the terms of the Geneva Convention?