

Betty Jeffrey

Australian Army Nursing Service

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 & 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](http://www.awm.gov.au/education/resources/nurses)



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 on account of her father's job. An accountant at the General Post Office, he was often transferred interstate to implement new accounting methods. Jeffrey came to dislike her first name, preferring to be called Betty. After many years of travelling, the family finally settled in East Malvern, Victoria, a 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 meant to "do your bit". She didn't know it at the time, but the basic life skills she had learnt 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

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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, aid the war effort, and represent her country.

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 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 the danger soon found them. Air raids soon 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 to 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 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

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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”.

She never saw her again.

Staff Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel, AANS, in service dress uniform, Melbourne, May 1941. AWM [P03960.001](http://www.awm.gov.au/education/resources/nurses/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 disappeared as they realised that 34 others were still missing. Where were Matron Paschke and the girls who had been with her?

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 along with a number of civilians and soldiers. Upon reaching the beach, the group decided to surrender, and sent some of the civilians to find the Japanese. But when the Japanese arrived on the scene, they shot or bayoneted the men and forced the women to wade into the sea and then machine-gunned them. There were only two survivors– Bullwinkel and a soldier, Private Cecil Kinsley, whom Vivian managed to keep alive for almost a week in the jungle, but who eventually died. After hearing the news, the nurses made a pact never to mention the incident again during their captivity, for everyone’s safety.

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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 Vynner Brooke. Their treatment by prison guards was often cruel. As punishment, nurses already weak from starvation were forced to stand for long periods in the hot sun. Others had to walk for hours to collect clean water for the guards’ sweet potato crops, while they themselves were forced to drink water that was often putrid and contaminated. Red Cross parcels carrying food and medical supplies were also held back from the prisoners.

A soft doll the nurses made to represent a Japanese guard nicknamed “Bully”. Made from a stolen Japanese soldier’s khaki-coloured shirt tail, other fabric, and leather scraps, it was given to Sister Jeffrey on her birthday in 1944. AWM [REL/11877](https://www.awm.gov.au/record/REL/11877)



Soldiering on

To cope with these circumstances, Jeffrey and her friends attempted to establish a routine whereby individuals were designated as cooks, cleaners, and gardeners. To keep their spirits up, a choir was established and music was written. They also performed skits and played cards.

The nurses made the most of what little they had, fashioning toys and clothes out of old rags, and drawing with, and on, whatever they could find. Throughout her imprisonment Jeffrey kept a diary. Finding an old exercise book and using a small stub of pencil, she made a record of her experiences, which she kept hidden. Had it been found, she would have been harshly punished or killed.

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

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Australia an emaciated shadow of her former self. Weighing just 32 kilograms and suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis, she spent two years in hospital and for a long time afterwards had to have injections of cortisone.



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

[Nurses Memorial Centre](#)

When Jeffrey returned to Australia, she and Bullwinkel travelled around Australia raising funds for a memorial to nurses who had died in Sumatra. The Nurses Memorial Centre, a “living memorial” to Australian nurses who 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.

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 and her book *White coolies*. Use this information to write your own short play highlighting the Australian nurses' experiences as prisoners of war.

- Who is your audience? What events/experiences would you emphasise? What would you down play? Why?

Watch *Paradise Road*, the 1997 film version of Jeffrey's book. Discuss how the story has been presented. What has been emphasised/highlighted from Betty's book and what has been omitted? Why?

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, prisoners were not allowed to keep a journal (they could be killed 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?

RESEARCH: What is the Geneva Convention (1929)? Why was it established? Did Japan sign it?

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*

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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)

- Read Betty Jeffrey's story. How were nurses who were prisoners of war treated? How does this comply with/contravene the terms of the Geneva Convention?

Why did the Japanese treat prisoners of war this way? What was their view of prisoners of war? Why?

The following images show three other nurses who were prisoners on Sumatra:



Sisters Jean Greer, Jess Doyle and Eileen Short, all from the 2/10th AGH, after their release from the prison camp. AWM [P01015.006](#) [P01015.005](#) & [P01015.007](#)

How do these photographs make you feel? If they were your sisters or aunts, how would you feel? What do these images reveal about the strength of these women?

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