

Sister Jessie Elizabeth Simons: Launceston's only female prisoner of war

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Jessie Elizabeth Simons.

This paper was prepared for presentation by drawing on the memoirs of Jessie Elizabeth Simons, *While History Passed*, and is published in the papers of the Launceston Historical Society with permission from the family.

Jessie was born in Launceston on 23 August 1911, one of nine children of Jabez Peter Simons and May Ann Muir Lees, then of 43 Canning Street.

She was educated in Launceston and did her general nursing training at the Launceston General Hospital (LGH), gaining certificates in child welfare and midwifery.

In 1954 Jessie wrote her memoirs and experiences as a wartime nurse and prisoner of war.

In 1941, soon after the declaration of World War Two, Jessie answered the call to join up for overseas service with the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).

Jessie and many other Australian nurses arrived in Malaya on 15 September 1941. One other Tasmanian among the group, DS Gardam, a member of the 2nd/4th Casualty Clearing Station, also trained at the LGH.

During the journey from Australia the nurses attended lectures on what their role was to be and what working conditions to expect. They also learned about local diseases and how to take special care against them.

Jessie's initial posting was to the main army hospital of some 600 beds at Malacca, some miles north of Singapore; but close enough to attend a Gracie Fields concert.

Frequent bombing raids occurred during the Japanese attack on Singapore. Several smaller hospitals were evacuated as a result of this advance which saw the Malacca hospital swell to 1,200 beds, more staff and equipment.

News came to Malacca on 24 January 1942 to evacuate and to move the whole hospital to St Patrick's School, twenty-five miles away on the far side of Singapore Island.

In her book Jessie recalls how difficult conditions were and how the medical staff had to make do with the meanest facilities.

One of the anaesthetists was a man of many talents:

At one camp he made a good shadowless lamp and at another he rearranged the plumbing to provide scrubbing-up bowls with running water and pipes to drain the waste away.

By February 1942 matters were at a serious stage as the distance separating the hospital from the war zone was becoming shorter every day.

The hospital received orders to prepare for immediate evacuation of all AANS staff to Singapore.

There was little time to dress, gather up a few belongings, iron rations, gas mask and then to run to the waiting ambulances.

The Japanese kept up the bombing across the city to obliterate the shipping and oil installations.

The nurses, crowded into many small boats, made their way through the great congestion of fleeing ships and destruction.

Out to sea lay the rescue ship, the *Vyner Brooke*, built to carry about twelve passengers but now was overloaded with sixty-five nurses plus a few other escapees.

The ship and all on board experienced several raids from Japanese planes in the next few days, even though the ship carried the white ensign.

Disaster struck on the 14th as yet another plane whined down. The ship lifted and rocked with the loud roar of a bomb exploding amidships and another that went straight down the funnel and destroyed the engine-room.

It was clear that the ship was doomed and orders were given to abandon her. Several lifeboats had been holed and rendered useless by the onslaught. Passengers, crew and the nurses clung to whatever would hold them afloat as they watched their rescue ship slide with a graceful rush beneath the sea.

The sea currents were strong, washing some survivors together, and rafts soon became crowded.

During the night Jessie and her co-survivors struggled to keep on the rafts in the hope that rescue was close at hand.

In the early hours of the next morning '... a black shadow crept out of the gloom. It carried no lights but the shudder of its screw in the water signified a real ship.' Was this their rescue?

A huge door opened in the side of the ship and from it landing craft crammed with armed men turned for an unseen distant shore.

Too late the survivors realised this was not to be their rescue, but a troop ship of the Japanese Navy heading for an attack on Sumatra, as they found out later.

All night they floated in and around the enemy boats, trying not to be seen, taking turns on the rafts and in the sea clinging to the ropes.

As dawn broke the soaked and frozen party could see that the Japanese troops had landed and that their fleet was anchored offshore.

After several hours in the morning light, one of the landing craft came alongside the raft holding Jessie and the nurses and they were pulled roughly on board. The men of the party were left in the water, and the raft was tied to the boat and was pulled to the beach on Bangko Island.

Now they all were prisoners of the Japanese. Although non-combatants were not supposed to be imprisoned, this did not seem to worry the Japanese. Soon the nurses were marched to Muntok, a trek of just a few miles.

The captives were treated reasonably well at this time and enjoyed cooked meals of rice one day and chicken the next. At Muntok, the nurses were given water to drink, and were herded together with about a thousand other prisoners and refugees, the survivors of some twenty-eight ships.

The next fortnight was spent at an old barracks, lately used by a large number of Chinese coolies. Conditions in the camp were quite basic. The toilets amounted to whatever rough facilities the men of the party were able to construct at the rear of the main prison building.

Bathing arrangements were also very crude, communal and consisted of a 'tong' or bath about twelve by five feet with a depth of three feet.

During the second week in camp, a nurse named Viv Bullwinkel was brought in. She had reached land in one of the leaking *Vyner Brooke* lifeboats with twenty-one nurses and some wounded men. Jessie and the other AANS heard Viv's grim story:

The men were taken into the jungle and killed, then the nurses, twenty-two in all, were ordered back into the water and were shot. Viv was only wounded and after their captors had left the area, she crawled into the jungle, where she was eventually picked up wounded, ill and starving and taken to the prison camp.

Of the original sixty-five AANS, only thirty-two, including Jessie and Shirley, had survived.

In the third week of captivity, Jessie and all the AANS were moved to another camp. They were ordered to prepare for travel at 3.00 am one morning in March 1942. They were forced to march to the shore at Muntok where they were ferried out to waiting tankers.

The ship, to which Jessie and her friends were consigned, had the odour of a garbage tip that was heightened by the shimmering tropical heat. There was no provision for sanitation except for a rough wooden box arranged over the stern.

During this ghastly sea voyage, humidity set in, eventually developing into torrential rain. Late in the day the ship turned into a muddy river that wound its way through drab mangrove swamps towards the town of Palembang.

The camps were not always the barbed wire, high walled variety but nonetheless the prisoners were confined by isolation and the threat of being shot if caught out of bounds.

This pattern of continually shifting camp and of bad conditions was to be the way of life for the nurses for the next three and a half years. They were not exactly ill-treated but conditions and circumstances were extremely difficult with illness and death inflicting their savage mark. Every time there was a new camp, the nurses had to fend for themselves using their own barter system and by making friendly negotiations with the locals for supplies.

Non-combatant personnel were not supposed to be held as prisoners which affected the rationing provided by their captors because officially they did not exist.

The Australians were bottled up with a few Dutch, British and Indonesian prisoners, but they showed the generous Aussie spirit by providing medical aid when and where it was needed and for whomever.

There were some grimly funny moments, and I quote Sister Jessie's words:

The Dutch interpreter appointed to supervise our requirements for the night was a fool. With a jaundiced eye on the proprieties, he proposed that the twenty-eight married couples amongst us should sleep together (presumably standing up) in one room about fifteen feet square; but he was persuaded to separate the men and women as usual. Conditions were very crowded and very uncomfortable sleeping on the floor.

One thing that really irked the nurses was the selfishness of the locals and Dutch parents who had not taken the opportunity to evacuate the many children who were in the camp at this time and suffering innocently for their parents' stupidity.

One day the prisoners were marched across Palembang to a cluster of abandoned Dutch houses. These quarters had some comforts; normal cooking facilities, electric light and ... privacy! So they thought! Jessie writes, that their captors:

would wander in and out of the houses at any time, even into the bathrooms. On one occasion ... a visitor found one girl in the nude doing her best to have a wash. After a brief inspection he laughed noisily and went out again, much to the victim's annoyance and relief.

The prisoners suspected trouble when orders came to clear their two assigned huts and to re-locate themselves in new quarters in two smaller buildings next door.

In moving, the girls took everything that could be lifted, even the fly-wire from the windows, an electric stove, the few light-globes, and the sockets that would hold them in place.

'We were soon under orders as charwomen,' writes Jessie, 'cleaning our old quarters and re-furbishing them for entertainment purposes.'

This part of the camp became known as 'Lavender Street' after an unsavoury thoroughfare in Singapore.

It is hard to express our feeling of horror and helplessness under these most trying conditions ... but we knew what had happened to the other girls on the beach.

The '*entertainment*' most definitely was not to the taste of any of the Australian women.

A British female collaborator was put in charge and soon was canvassing the whole camp for 'geisha girls' to entertain the six Japanese officers.

Of course there were no volunteers and so the nurses were ordered to assist at the club's opening night.

In Jessie's words:

The thirty-two nurses met at four o'clock to lay out a plan of campaign. As a result we left at home those who were sick, and the most glamorous of the remainder to stay with them.

The rest of us set out to make ourselves as hideous as possible ... For this night we discarded all make-up, with our hair plastered down in the most unbecoming style, or dragged back in imitation of a nineteenth century school ma'am. Most of us went barefoot but some added the ludicrous touch of men's heavy boots worn with bare legs.

The six Japs were startled by the invasion of twenty-seven gaunt 'harpies'. ... Our numbers made the Japs' romantic ideas difficult to put into practice. Food and wine and drugs were handed around by two British waiters, but were declined in accordance with our previous agreement.

One astonished Jap asked, 'What do Australian girls drink?'

A nurse replied sweetly, 'Oh we never drink anything but milk.'

This stressful arrangement continued for some time until the nurses were able to contact a Dutch Red Cross official who complained to the Japanese Headquarters. Consequently the 'club' was abandoned and then the prisoners were neglected and given no food as punishment.

They again turned to more bartering with the local people for any food, available eggs, fruit or chickens; anything to defeat the hunger.

The prisoners were moved once more; this time to a group of newer houses about a mile from Bukit Besar where they stayed for the next seventeen months.

Here they were introduced to the wonders of Japanese food hygiene and the art of butchery – Japanese style. When a pig from the men's camp had died, the meat was offered to the Women's camp

We debated for a long time the advisability of adding him to our diet, but finally reckoned it better to die of slow starvation than swift poisoning.

The nurses kept busy with their dressing station which was at one time in a garage near their houses. This building doubled on Sundays as the Protestant Chapel.

Personal abuses were quite frequent. Sister Jessie wrote,

... Mavis and I were walking along the road on lawful business when we were stopped by an order shouted raucously by an approaching Jap. We pretended not to understand his order, and a moment later he was shouting furiously, slapping our faces and menacing us with his mounted bayonet ... I moved back from the face slapping until a jab in the back from a barbed wire fence stopped my retreat. The bayonet pricked my chest as the furious Jap shouted unintelligibly. There I stayed until the uproar attracted a number of interns who distracted the Jap long enough for us to slip away. I did not sleep that night.

Disease struck the nurses without discrimination and rarely a month went by without the nurses losing one of their comrades.

The men of the camp usually helped by digging the graves and providing the rough coffins, but it was the nurses who saw their friends put to rest, always with a full honours service in uniform.

There were many personalities in and around the camps.

Siki was the mean-souled Camp Commandant with whom the nurses had a great deal of trouble.

Mrs Hinch, a YWCA representative, who was in charge of British Internal arrangements, did much to gain some improvement in food and conditions for the camp.

Mrs Muller was a Dutchwoman who could speak Japanese. She would argue very vigorously with Siki. But the few concessions she extracted were slight.

The men's camp, not far away, was better provisioned than the nurses' camp. The men had goats, chickens and pigs.

... The Japs really loved the goats and whenever an official or someone important appeared, they paraded the goats as evidence of good treatment.

History passed by these women but they were never forgotten at home. Friends and families scanned the newspapers for reports.

A little information filtered through to the camps via the Dutch Red Cross but it was always old news and rarely relevant to the nurses, so they heard nothing from home.

Their release came three and a half years after their capture and after many more moves, bouts of malaria, beriberi, dengue, and other dreadful conditions that go with poor food and not enough of it, bad water, the tropical heat and humidity, drugs, fever and weakness and just the trauma of being detained in a foreign place under combat conditions. Death was a constant visitor to the camp.

The last camp – Loeboek Linggau – was the worst. By now, the prisoners were all in a very poor state of health; really at their lowest.

Malnutrition and disease were rife. Everyone suffered. Keeping clothes clean and bug-free was a nightmare. There was no soap and garments, once white now earthy coloured, were always rough and dry.

Jessie took to using a piece of cardboard, then later a cushion, to protect herself from dust that crept into every crease in clothes and skin. The nurses had become destitute and sick, with no supplies. Nothing came from the Japanese at this camp except water and shelter.

At a time when things were at their very worst, Jessie recalled:

Rumours came through that the war was over. News gathered strength from reports of Dutch and Eurasian women who had been over-friendly with the guards.

On 24th August 1945, the whole camp was mustered for a big announcement. Through a Dutch interpreter Captain Siki said,

“Now there is peace, and we will all soon be leaving. If we have made any mistakes in the past we hope you will forgive us, and now we will be friends”.

‘Just like that.’ Jessie wrote.

... For half an hour I sat under a rubber tree and just howled ... The sense of relief was overwhelming, and I just let go. ... at the services of thanksgiving organised by the religious groups, national anthems and ‘God Save the King’ were sung.

I felt too weary to take part in all this, although I was certainly thankful enough. I fell asleep that night to the refrain ‘All my troubles are over’.

Within a few days the nurses were in Singapore.

They sailed from there to Fremantle in a hospital ship and were really surprised to find the ‘red carpet’ out for a big welcome home party, flowers and practical gifts. And the nurses were issued with new uniforms.

The next stop was Melbourne: more receptions, gifts and, best of all, family members and friends.

On Sunday 27 October 1945, Sister Jessie Elizabeth Simons arrived at Western Junction, Launceston. After all that she and her friends had endured for three and a half years, here she was – safely home!

List of Nurses who were evacuated from Singapore on 12 February 1942, by the S.S. *Vyner Brooke*:

Names of those not taken prisoner:

Shot on the beach of Bangko Island, 15 February 1942:

Drummond, Matron 2/13th AGH

Casson Wright McGlade Fairweather

Tait Bridge Elmes Harris

Neuis Beard Cuthbertson Salmon

Hodson Keats Willmott Stewart

Ogilvie Halligan Kerr Farmaner

Bullwinkel (shot, but survived and later taken prisoner.)

Drowned:

Paschke, Matron 2/10th AGH

Kinsella, Sister in charge 2/4th CCS

Innes McDonald Dorsch Trennary

Clark Colman Bates Schuman

Wilton Russell

Names of those taken prisoner:

2/10th AGH

N James (Vic)	P Mittelheuser (Qld)	J Doyle (NSW)
P Blake (NSW)	J Greer (NSW)	AB Jeffrey (Vic)
P Gunther (NSW)	C Oxley (NSW)	JJ Blanch (NSW)
F Trotter (Qld)	B Woodbridge (Vic)	MW Davis (NSW)
R Singleton (Vic)	A Syer (Vic)	D Freeman (Vic)
J Twedell (Qld)	C Delforce (Qld)	

2/4th CCS

EM Hannah (SA)	W Rayment (SA)	DS Gardam (Tas)
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2/13th AGH

E Short (Qld)	W Oram (Vic)	V Bullwinkel (SA)
J Ashton (SA)	G Highes (Vic)	VI McElnea (Qld)
V Smith (Qld)	B Hempstead (Qld)	V Clancy (SA)
S Muir (Qld)	I Harper (WA)	JE Simons (Tas)

Of these the following died in POW Camps, 1945:

At Bangko Island: W Rayment; I Singleton; B Hempstead; DS Gardam.

At Loeboek Linggau, Sumatra: WM Davis; G Hughes; D Freeman; P Mittelheuser.

Acknowledgements and References

- Jessie Elizabeth Simons, *While History Passed*, William Heinemann Ltd, Melbourne, 1954.
- Photograph Jessie Elizabeth Simons by Van Diemen Studio, Launceston, 1954.