

Remembering a Great Australian: War Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel

Today, 26 January 2016, is Australia Day.

Some years ago, here at New English Review, I embarked upon an occasional series of postings entitled “Great Australians”, intending to draw attention and give honour to some of the more inspiring and creative persons – some well known on the world stage, some not – who have been born in the Great South Land during the past century and more. Over the past two years, alas, the project lapsed. Time, therefore, to start over; for there are many other wonderful people whom I would like to celebrate and introduce – or reintroduce – to NER readers, whether they be from the Anglosphere, or further afield. People who are not only great Australians, but worthy representatives of what V S Naipaul called ‘the universal civilisation’.

Let us begin, therefore, with a war nurse who served in the Pacific theatre of World War II – Vivian Bullwinkel, known also as Vivian Statham after her post-war marriage. In December 2015 her story was recalled when her medals and other mementoes were donated to the Australian War Memorial.

As reported by the ABC ‘s Adrienne Francis at the time.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-18/remarkable-sole-survivor-w2-massacre-statham-remembered/7042440>

“Australia’s Most Distinguished War Nurse, Vivian Statham, Remembered At Australian War Memorial”.

“The medals of Australia’s most distinguished war nurse have been donated to the Australian War Memorial, joining her

clandestine diaries, photographs, and the bullet-riddled uniform she wore during her captivity as a prisoner of war.

“Lieutenant-Colonel Vivian Statham, also known by her maiden name Vivian Bullwinkle, was the sole survivor of the Bangka Island Massacre in 1942, in which Japanese soldiers shot the survivors of a shipwreck, south of Singapore.

“Lt. Col Statham was born in Kapunga, South Australia, and she trained as a nurse and midwife at Broken Hill in New South Wales before joining the Australian Army Nursing Service in 1941.

“She had previously been rejected from the Royal Australian Air Force for having flat feet.

“On the 12th February 1942 she was among 65 nurses evacuated during the fall of Singapore aboard the SS Vyner Brooke, which sank four days later after being torpedoed at sea by Japanese bombers.

“She drifted at sea for many hours, clinging to a lifeboat, before she and 21 other nurses made it ashore to Bangka Island with other survivors.

“The nurses began tending the wounded, and the group decided to surrender to the Japanese.

“The following day, at gunpoint, she was one of those 22 nurses forced to wade into the sea, and they were machine-gunned from behind”, said Australian War Memorial director Brendan Nelson.

“She was shot through the abdomen, but the bullet miraculously missed vital organs.

“She feigned death and then emerged from the heavily blood-stained water to then go up onto the beach.”

“Lt-Col Statham hid for twelve days in the jungle while caring

for a wounded British soldier, before she attempted again to surrender to the Japanese.

“She was a prisoner-of-war for more than three years, and had to hide her bullet-riddled nurse’s uniform and diary, made from Bible pages, in order to survive and tell the story of the massacre and camp atrocities.

“She couldn’t speak to a single person about what she had seen and what she endured”, Dr Nelson said.

“It turned into hell on earth for many people, including Vivian and her military colleagues”, her nephew John Bullwinkel said.

“Her years in a POW camp were in conditions that we would all find unimaginable today.”

“The true nature of the nurses’ compassion and improvisation came out in many different ways, helping and nursing their seriously ill and dying colleagues and civilians, until their release in 1945.

“They improvised medically to help their colleagues, and those are probably the untold stories that were really the true test of their characters, of their resolve, and of their team spirit.

“Burying their own dead every day was no happy event in those incredibly poor and deprived conditions.”

“After her years of captivity and privation as a POW she weighed just four stone, or around 25 kilograms.

“Following the war, she gave evidence of her horrific experiences at the Tokyo War Crimes Commission Trials in 1947, the same year she retired from the military.

“Her medal group includes the world’s highest honour available to nurses, the Royal Red Cross Florence Nightingale Medal,

awarded in 1947.

“I’m very proud of her achievements and pleased that all of this important memorabilia of hers, and of the country, is in one place”, Mr Bullwinkel said at the memorial presentation, on what would have been his aunt’s 100th birthday.

“When Lt Col Statham returned to Australia, she was determined to improve recognition, training and conditions for Australian nurses.

“Initiatives such as the establishment of the Nurses’ Memorial Centre in Melbourne, the ongoing nursing scholarships, the advancement of educational standards for nurses, with a degree course being the result”, Mr Bullwinkel said.

“The introduction of the Nurse Aid role to provide better care, the evacuation of orphan children from Vietnam, and palliative care nursing.”

“Dr Nelson said the nurse was one of the country’s “most remarkable” Australians.

“Whilst she wasn’t, nor couldn’t be awarded a Victoria Cross, she was worthy of it in every sense”, he said.

“In honouring her and her life we honour all of them.”

‘Them’ being, I assume, other war nurses. – CM

‘Lt Col Statham died in July 2000 aged 84.

“Her medals will be on temporary display in the Reg Saunders Gallery from 18-21 December, before going on display in the Second World War Galleries in the New Year.”

Click on the following link and you will be able to see a photograph.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/fiftyaustralians/5.asp>

More, much more, here, on what she survived.

<http://www.angellpro.com.au/bullwinkel.htm>

A Telegraph article published at the time of her death in 2000 records that, after the war, she “rose to the top of her profession, retiring as Matron of the Queen’s Memorial Infectious Diseases Hospital, Melbourne”.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1348893/Vivian-Bullwinkel.html>

Having endured and recorded horrors, having lived – by luck or grace – to testify against evil, Vivian Bullwinkel, who became Vivian Statham after her marriage (following the war), did not give way to despair or self-pity, but spent the rest of her long life living out her original vocation – caring for the sick and the dying – with intelligence, integrity and passion, to the very best of her ability, and making sure that there would be other well-equipped nurses to follow in her footsteps.

She was indeed a great Australian, a worthy daughter of her country and a reminder of what western civilisation can, at its best, bring forth.

As our Jewish friends say of the beloved departed: May her memory be a blessing.