

Arggh-h! ... Help! ... H-e-elp! ... Chin up, now, Bully! ... There's no one about to help you. ... Just like back then. Anyway, back then, calling out got you shot. Heh!

I can see it, still can't believe it. Unspeakable, gut-atrophying trauma, all over in – minutes. Our fearless Matron at the front, leading us into the sea - and calling: 'Chin up, girls, I'm proud of you.' And the next minute, literally - ... wholesale slaughter!

I am 26 at the time. Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel; known as 'Bully'. 1942: In Malaya with the army nursing service, when suddenly we're herded out of the hospital and pushed roughly onto ships: Singapore is capitulating. 130 hospital folk and 300 assorted others, suddenly bound for Sumatra.

The first group of 65 go sailing off into the blue yonder. ... We – are the second group - ... Our ship is struck out of a clear blue sky. It goes straight down. We scabble for the lifeboats and a second aircraft zooms low and rakes the water with bullets.

Not enough lifeboats, so some jump overboard. We cry out to them - watch them - dozens of them, our lovely pals from the wards – gurgle downwards.

Still afloat, sea-sick and soul-sick, the rest of us paddle with our arms towards a cruel mirage: an island ahead. No, god love us, it's real! As evening falls, we clamber ashore on a golden beach straight out of a glossy travel brochure. ... But, of course: it is Japanese-controlled: Radji Beach, Bangka Island. And they are waiting for us.

Those who stagger up to the soldiers to surrender are immediately dragged away. ... We wiser ones wait on the beach with what's left of our dignity. But that doesn't spare any of us, men or women, the most vile of abuses.

Once we're no longer 'useful' – about 48 hours of it - we are divided up: the men led away first. We hear the detonations. The soldiers saunter back down the beach, casually wiping their bayonets clean of blood. We are next.

We choke with revulsion, and some of the girls are in mad despair, but Matron bellows: 'Girls, we're staying strong. To the end. ... Now, chin up.'

They prod us in the backs into the sea. There is no struggle now. We are silent and resigned: in

serene disbelief: that anything as abominable as this could be happening in such an idyllic place. Paradise turned utterly evil.

Then the spray of bullets. ... I am knocked clean off my feet. Fall face down, swallowing salt water, convulsing. Hear the thud of bodies as they fall. ... Voices jeering. I stay flat, play dead. I am fully conscious: 'Bully, you're surviving – it's impossible.' For who knows how long?

The steady wash of the waves brings me into shallow water. I gasp myself upright: there is nothing. No one. No sea of blood. Just – me. ... Everything, everyone else has ... gone. No - body. Nothing.

I crawl into a hiding-place, heal my wounds with sea water in the dead of night – encounter one other soul: Kingsley, like me the sole survivor of his own mass shooting. For 12 days we wait it out, before the state of his wounds demands we, regrettably, surrender - on that same beach, to those same men, who bind our wrists and lead us away.

Kingsley – dies. ... Kingsley. Was that his first name or his surname? No minute of our shared time ever seemed the right moment – to ask.

I live on in POW camp for three more cruel years. I never speak, they never ask, so at least I'm not shot. And then: September '45, *'it'* seems to be over. We are freed and flown to Singapore. Till 1947, I resume work at the military hospital, keeping 'mum' about the massacre until I'm safe back on Australian soil. Even then, it won't be easy.

Nothing like work to heal your self-pity. Matron would be proud.

Back home by the early '50s, I head straight to the Infectious Diseases Hospital in Melbourne – as Matron! Well, I'd had the best teacher. My free time I give to the Citizen Military Forces – where, at 62, I meet and marry Colonel Frank Statham. No fuss. Frank – understands.

They've showered me with medals and honours and all that, but - and I'm thankful, of course - but they - erase nothing. I did return to Bangka Island in the '90s: to unveil a shrine to all my lovely colleagues who died there so brutally - while I didn't. It was as if it were yesterday. I still could not – grasp it.

And now – heh - I think I can safely say I'm having a heart attack. Well, fair enough: I'm 84. Frank's gone now and - ... Look, I never deserved to live another almost 60 years, and many a time I've felt that my survival was just not - merited. ... So if I go now, it's willingly. Into the blue yonder. I just won't be *playing* dead this time. ... Coming, girls!

... Chin up, now, Bully!

Matron Vivian Bullwinkel, RANS

Angie Cairns