

## **Rita Eva Kneebone**

15 September 2004

These are some of my war experiences from World War II.

Immediately after the war was declared, I did a training course in First Aid, Home Nursing and Maintenance Ambulance, and completed a licence for an eight-wheel Army vehicle. We worked in a military hospital in Claremont both day and night duty to learn a little more of actual hospital routine.

In 1941, I was chosen to go with 24 other girls for overseas service in the military hospitals, thus releasing men for active service. We were then sent to Northam Hospital where we had the inoculations necessary to prevent illnesses whilst away. We left in the early hours of November 11<sup>th</sup> 1941 by army truck to Fremantle. After endeavouring to take us all out to the Queen Mary by a small ferry, it was decided that the water was far too rough to attempt to board us so we were given leave until midnight. We then reported to an Army place at the foot of William Street in Perth. Another attempt was made, so we were driven again to Fremantle where we arrived at 2am. We spent the rest of the night on the wharf with rats and mice running in and out of the bales and bags of wheat, oats and chaff. About 7am, we eventually were able to board the Queen Mary and join the 175 girls who had sailed from Sydney.

We were told later that the captain's orders were to wait only one more hour for us. This was because the water was so rough that the small boat, which took us out to the "Mary", would have been dashed to pieces. Of course, the "Mary" was a troop ship and to enable all the troops to have a bed, hammocks were swung across the huge swimming pools on the liner.

On the 23 November 1941, I arrived at Port Taufiq on the gulf of Suez in Egypt, North Africa. Then we boarded a "square wheeled train" as we called it. In the early hours, about 2.30am, we arrived at Gaza on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and still in Egypt. There was no station so we were told to jump off the train with all our baggage and we started to march about a mile to where we did not know. Voices echoed through the darkness saying "You'll be sorry". Of course the men thought we were men. Imagine their surprise next day when they saw our washing hanging on the tent ropes! Then it was "Good Lord, they're women". One of the girls had died of meningitis on the way over, so we were in quarantine for six weeks, and no visitors were allowed, only relatives. You have no idea how many newfound brothers and uncles etc we suddenly discovered we had!

We were with the 2<sup>nd</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> AGH for a while until the 2<sup>nd</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> AGH came to Gaza then it was working very long hours doing any job allotted to us – dressing wounds, taking temperatures, bed sponges and even cooking. I can remember making a huge bucket of water into soup for over 60 patients, putting anything we could find into the water. Of course, the cooking was done on Primus burners. I can remember being in charge of a 64-

bed ward on night duty and being the only one on duty. I had six patients on the danger list and we had to change dressings, take temperatures and give out medication. A Sister was in charge of one ward and a VA was in sole charge either side. She would come up to check on us whenever she could. I would start the bed sponges at midnight and get through by 7am and would have to write up a report. Even patients who had been treated at forward areas, and had plasters on their limbs would arrive at our hospital fly-blown. Although this sounds awful, the maggots ate into the wounds, eating the badness out, thus saving the soldiers lives in many cases.

There was one air raid near us, so near that we had to wear the Red Cross brassards night and day, in case of capture and to show that we were under the protection of the Geneva Convention.

Whilst off-duty for a few hours, route marches, often six to eight miles, were the order of the day, just to keep us fit! A small bus was at our disposal so some afternoons when I had some free time; I would help about eight to ten patients to Gaza Beach. I had bought a portable gramophone with a couple of records, it helped to pass away an hour or two. At one stage, I swam in a surf carnival at Gaza Beach but on reaching the first marker where a soldier was waiting to make sure we rounded it, I said "I can't go on". He just gave me a mighty push and I caught a breaker to the beach and came in second! I still have the certificate to prove it – Gaza Beach July 11<sup>th</sup> 1942.

When Japan entered the war, the hospital was ordered back to Australia so after 16 months, there I was back on board the "Queen Mary". It was a very large convoy returning. Just before Fremantle, the orders were to get ready to go overboard as it was believed that a Japanese submarine was after the liner. The "Mary" went along way south before being sure she had lost the sub and it was safe to come back to Fremantle.

After 21 days leave and a welcome home march through Perth, the Army took us over. We were then known as the AAMWS (Australian Army Medical Women's Service). We all went to a rookies school to learn how to do all the things we had been doing for all the time anyway. The hospital was moved to the Atherton Tablelands in Queensland where the wounded from New Guinea were brought to the hospital. Whilst we were in the tropics, we were given Atebrin to combat malaria. It turned us yellow – even the whites of our eyes.

Every 12 months, I was sent home on leave to Perth by troop train. It would take 18 days to reach home and we were lucky to have a bed on the train. Mostly, the bed was a carriage floor and just a cup of water for the morning wash. After 21 days leave, it was time to return back the same way. I can remember paying a shilling to have a shower at Rockhampton on the way back.

After two and a quarter years, the hospital again was on the move to Morotai Island off New Guinea in the Molucca Passage for three to four weeks (no holiday) working in the wards again till our movement orders came in. This time on the hospital ship "Wanganella". The trip was so rough half the girls were seasick so the well had to care for the sick.

The day the war ended was the day I will never forget – 15 August 1945. That was the day our ship arrived on Labuan Island in Brunei Bay off the coast of Borneo. Although the war had ended, our work had only just begun. The next six months were the worst and saddest of my life. The conditions were horrific, the wards had no floors and we worked up to 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Prisoners of War from Changi Camp in Singapore, Borneo and Labuan were the worst you could even imagine. Some of the prisoners weighed just four, five or six stone. It was no effort to carry a six-foot man. I remember lifting a six-foot man up from the ground in my arms like a baby and carrying him to his bed. I also remember offering a patient a drink of Milo. He just said, "Nurse, if I drink that I will die." The prisoners were in terrible condition. We could not take their trousers or boots off unless someone held their legs; their leg bones were no bigger than a broom handle. The atrocities told to me by these heroes were also unbelievable.

Because of mosquitoes and the risk of malaria, we were not allowed to shower before 7am or after 7pm at night. We would leave a bucket of water outside our tent so that when we came off night duty, we would have our wash or shower. But the soldiers heard of this and although a fence was around our tents, it was only made of wire and the soldiers could see through it so that ended that idea.

Powdered egg was used for the first time but when it was cooked, it was green and not very appetising.

There were only two girls from WA who served on Labuan Island and I was one of them. There were 25 girls from the whole of Australia.

In 1995, I went back to Labuan Island for the 50 years commemorations and re-enactment of the landing of our soldiers. It was a sad time for us all. The men were mostly the ones who had survived the landing over 50 years ago. Nearly every day of the 10-day tour we shed tears. Although the Labuan War Cemetery is kept in perfect condition, it was very sad to see because almost 1700 graves of our poor men were marked with just a white cross and a copper plaque which read "Unknown soldier now with God". The Japanese had destroyed all their discs and identities so that no-one knows who or where their son or their husband or relative is.

We were given red poppies to place on a grave and it was so sad that I cried. A civilian couple, a few rows from where I was say me very upset. The lady came to me, put her arms around me and said, "We really do care. We will look after them always."

You have probably heard or read of Jack Sue, who at the age of 17 accomplished some of the most heroic acts on Labuan. He escorted the 50 or so people who went back on the tour. During the tour, I was told of the Sandakan death march, when out of the 376 men who were forced to march, only six survived.

A lifelong friendship has formed since we boarded the "Queen Mary" in 1941. In 1961, we had our first reunion in Melbourne and from then on, each few years we would hold another reunion in a different state. These are unforgettable, nothing had changed in our feelings for one another, only sadness for the 139 of the 200 who have now departed us – but their memories never will.

While I was in Melbourne, a Dedication Ceremony of a Memorial was held in Canberra to all who served in World War II. Unfortunately the rain bucketed down and as we were all out in the open trying to keep dry under umbrellas, it was not at all pleasant. Even the Navy, in their white uniforms and the Army standing to attention were drenched. However, it will be something I will never forget and I am happy that I could make the journey.

In May 1995, there was an interview about me in the West Australian newspaper regarding a report on my experiences with POW's on Labuan Island of the atrocities by the Japanese. At 8am that morning, a lady from Hillary's rang me and said more should be told of these stories. Her father was treated so badly as a POW and before he died, he told her how because he had sores all over his body. The Japs had tied him to a bull ant nest for four days and nights and each time the Japs passed, they urinated on him. Imagine the agony of the ants eating into his wounds but that apparently saved his life for a few years.

On Anzac Day I attend the dawn service at Kings Park and then march in the parade through the city as I have done for many years now; and I remember the brave men from all the services that laid down their lives so that we, and the youth of today, can live in peace.

Lest we forget.

Never let us.

# POW victim haunts aide

BY JERRY PRATLEY

TEARS well up in former army nursing aide Rita Kneebone's eyes when she recalls the shock of seeing an Australian soldier just released from a Japanese POW camp 50 years ago.

Mrs Kneebone, of Mt Pleasant, was serving in a tent field hospital in New Guinea and the soldier was one of the first Australians brought in from Singapore's infamous Changi POW camp.

"He was on a stretcher and I took one look at him and ran off to the kitchen and cried for half an hour," Mrs Kneebone said.

She was told many tales of atrocities.

"They would get about 30 prisoners in a circle and pick one out and kill him in front of the others," she said.

"Sometimes the prisoner would be shot or they would hack pieces off him.

"If one of the prisoners was caught not looking, he would also be killed."

Mrs Kneebone was one

of 200 ordinary Australian women who went overseas as Voluntary Aid Detachments to work in hospitals in the Middle East and New Guinea. They were not qualified nurses but had been trained in first aid.

A group of Perth VADs met this month to celebrate the 50th anniversary of VE Day.

Mrs Kneebone also had a picture of two recovered former POWs wearing bathers to show off the transformation in their physical appearance.

Another VAD, Yvonne Christian, of Melville, was serving in Gaza when she heard an enemy radio broadcast which made her think her fiancé had died on a ship sunk by the Germans.

It was not until seven months later when she returned to Perth that she learnt he was alive.

"We got married three days after I got back," Mrs Christian said.

The women left Fremantle aboard the Queen Mary on November 10, 1941, and served varying times up until 1945.



**Reunited:** Perth women who served as nursing aides during World War II. Left to right, Peg Payne, Isla Jones, Yvonne Christian, Tuck Fealy, Joan Dowson and Rita Kneebone. PICTURE: ROD TAYLOR.



# League honours Rita

RITA Kneebone, of Mt Pleasant (right), has been awarded a life membership of the Returned and Services League in appreciation of more than 40 years service.

She is thrilled with the honour.

"It was a shock and most unexpected," Mrs Kneebone said.

"The others all knew in February, but I had no idea until I was presented in March."

Ms Kneebone joined

the Voluntary Aid Detachment when war was declared.

She trained in first aid, home nursing and ambulance maintenance and left Fremantle with 24 other girls in 1941, bound for Gaza in the Middle East.

Mrs Kneebone worked in the wards for 16 months, dressing wounds, cooking and helping out wherever she was needed.

On leave, she visited Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and relaxed on Gaza beach.

In 1943 the hospital was ordered back to Australia.

"We were sent to a rookie school in Claremont, where we were taught all the things we'd already been doing," Mrs Kneebone said.

"Then they moved the hospital to Queensland and renamed us the Australian Army Medical Womens Service."

Two-and-a-half years

later, Mrs Kneebone was sent to work in the wards in New Guinea.

She was one of only two WA girls who landed on Labuan Island off Borneo as the war ended.

"It was the worst six months in my life," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Conditions were very primitive."

"There was nothing of them, they were so ill, it was tragic."

When Mrs Kneebone returned to Labuan Island on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Pacific war, her sad memories were revived.

Mrs Kneebone has dedicated a major part of her life to the RSL, as well as bringing up three children and enjoying two grandchildren. Her life membership adds to an already impressive list of certificates of appreciation of her efforts.

