



# Great Queensland Women From Our Past

## Women War Heroes – Sylvia Muir and Joyce Tweddell (World War Two, 1939 - 1945)

### Audio transcript

In “Heroic Australian Women in War”,\* I take two Queensland nurses, Nurse Joyce Tweddell, and Sister Sylvia Muir. Joyce Tweddell enlists as a nurse. They are sent out to Singapore, she and her group of friends. They say that the Japanese can never take Singapore, but of course it’s wrong. The Japanese come down on bicycles, and they were there in Singapore, and the British army really were terrified because Hong Kong had been captured, and the nurses, the army nurses in Hong Kong had been raped by the Japanese before they were murdered, so they were keen to get them out of Singapore.

They got them out on anything they could - yachts, cargo boats, anything. They got out the women civilians and the nurses, and along the route of this little yacht called the Vyner Brooke, they are off Bangka Island, and Vivian Bulwinkel and Sylvia Muir, and Joyce Tweddell are on this boat. It’s got a red cross on the deck, and the Japanese bomb it all the same, and the boat just starts sinking.

Vivian and Joyce are strong swimmers. They swim to shore, to Bangka Island Beach and Joyce and Sylvia are immediately picked up and imprisoned, but Vivian is on another beach with a group of soldiers, and the Japanese arrive. There’s the sound of shots, they come back, wiping their bayonets, and they say to the nurses to go into the sea. They’re all wearing Red Cross armbands, this makes no difference. Forty one nurses go into the sea, Vivian, the 41<sup>st</sup> one, the rest of them are shot. The matron who Vivian adores, says “Keep your chins up girls and show them we’re not afraid to die”.

Anyway, Vivian’s fine, she comes to and she can’t believe she’s not dead. She floats for an hour in the water daring to get her head up to get some breath, and then she looks sideways. The Japanese are gone and there’s the bodies of her comrades all around her, and she comes ashore, and she survived. She bathes her wound with sea water, and then in three days, she gives herself up, because the Sumatrans are too terrified of the Japanese to give her any food.

Then she joins Joyce and the others in a series of terrible prison camps where they’re fed a handful of rotten weevily rice a day. If they stand up to the Japanese, they don’t bow low enough, they are put out in the sun, in the blazing sun without water. Some of them die of Beriberi and dysentery. The Japanese refuse to give them the medicines that will save them, which is the hardest thing for the nurses, not being able to save their compatriots. Joyce, who’s been a big bonny girl, she’s down to skin and bone, she’s a living skeleton.

Fortunately the war ends, and they are found by a spotter plane in the air. She’s taken to hospital in Singapore, gradually regains her strength, but she’s told by the doctor, “You can never nurse again, you’ll never be able to lift a heavy body.” She comes back to Brisbane. She decides that if she can’t be a nurse, she will study and become a radiographer, and she becomes a brilliant radiographer. She really prolongs the lives of many Queenslanders by using x-ray treatments to arrest cancers. She’s greatly loved by her staff, but she would never talk about the war.

You know, today you have all these instant celebrities bragging about everything they’ve ever done, and you get these amazing women like Joyce Tweddell and Vivian Bulwinkel who don’t want to talk about what they’ve done, they were just so incredible, and she’d saved so many lives. She was really a wonderful, wonderful woman.

\* de Vries, Susanna, *Heroic Australian Women in War*. Harper Collins Publishers Australia.  
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