

# TRIBUTE TO A SPECIAL LADY

1912 - 1995

I was about to cross the street with my seven year old grand daughter when I noticed the funeral cortege of Valrie Smith slowly moving toward us. We stopped and I removed my hat, placing it on my chest. My grand daughter asked, "Why did you take your hat off Grandad?"

Looking down at her, I explained, "As a mark of respect to a very special lady."

"Did you know her?"

"No, I didn't know her, but I know a lot about her."

As the funeral cortege passed by, my thoughts went back to when I was seven. My parents, along with relations and neighbours, would sit around the big cabinet radio with its colourful magic turning eye, listening to the ABC News broadcast. I realise now that the adults were forever hoping to hear that the push South by the Japanese Imperial Forces had been stopped. It was during one of these news broadcasts that my mother first mentioned the name of Val Smith.

*Valrie Elizabeth Smith, you were born on the 2nd February 1912 on your parents' property, Lilyvale, Wondecla, eighty miles south west of Cairns. You were the eldest child of Ivy and Samuel Smith. Educated at the Herberton State School, you then attended Saint Mary's Church of England School for your secondary education. After matriculation, you set your heart on a nursing career, obtaining a position at the Cairns Base Hospital. From there you graduated a triple certificate Sister.*

*World War II broke out. Hearing your country's call to duty, you joined the Australian Army Nursing Service, being attached to the 8th Division, a member of the 2/13th AGH unit.*

*Your army nursing career began in Malaya, at a hospital in Malacca. When Japan entered the war, on the 8th December, 1941, you found yourself very close to the action. Your unit was evacuated to Singapore where hospitals were set up under impossible conditions. The evacuation of Singapore began early in February, 1942. How you must have felt when orders came to abandon your patients and be prepared to leave within two hours.*

*Sixty-five nursing Sisters and a few service men as well as civilian women and children were placed aboard the ship Vyner Brook - destination Australia. However, a naval battle on the night of the 12th February saw Friday the 13th dawn with your little ship separated from the convoy. On the 14th February the Vyner Brook was under attack from the Japanese Air Force. After the sinking of the ship you found yourself among the survivors trying to reach land. Land, that although was in sight, seemed impossible to reach. Strong tides with ocean rips caused survivors to be spread over a large area. When land was finally reached, you found yourself a prisoner of war. With some of your nursing Sister friends and civilians, you spent the next three and a half years in these POW camps.*

*Courage, hope and determination were the only things that kept you sane in spite of the unbelievable inhumane conditions suffered by all in the POW camps. When Sister Vivian Bullwinkel was brought into the camp, almost two weeks after the sinking of the Vyner Brook, the emotions you all must have felt are impossible to imagine. She told of the horror and slaughter at Bangka Island. Sister Bullwinkel's party had been captured on the beach. They were separated into two groups - men in one and women in the other. The men were marched along the beach, around a rocky corner. Their captors returned, wiping their bayonets. There was no doubt as to what had happened. The women, among whom were twenty-two nursing Sisters, were ordered to walk out into the sea. Their captors then turned machine guns on them. Although wounded in the thigh, Sister Bullwinkel was the only survivor.*

*Morale in the camp was of most importance so the entire camp agreed not to mention or discuss Sister Bullwinkel's experience even in private.*

*Camp conditions were appalling. Food was deplorable even when available. Yet, initiative, which kept prisoners going, prevailed. Valrie, you constantly put your life in danger by arguing with your captors in an effort to have them adhere to the Geneva Convention. Your efforts always appeared to fall on deaf ears. As a nursing sister, you realised that POWs were undernourished. This caused immune systems to suffer which resulted in sickness throughout the camp. How saddened you must have felt when your best friend, Sister Raymont, passed away on 8th February 1945 from a malaria attack. Quinine, if available, may have saved her. Foot wear was a constant problem in the camp. You used your initiative, probably stemming from your country upbringing, by helping whenever you could. You earned the nickname of Bootmaker, a name you carried even after the war.*

*Liberation, September 1945! Of the sixty-five Sisters that sailed from Singapore on the Vyner Brook, only thirty-two celebrated this wonderful day. You must have been relieved to hear that the Sisters who evacuated Singapore on the 11th February, 1942 arrived safely in Australia.*

*On returning to Australia, you were presented with the Mention in Despatches Medal for courage and initiative while a prisoner of war. Valrie, I recall you visiting the Herberton State School with other enlisted personnel from the Herberton District. How you stood out from the rest in your grey uniform and cap – probably because I had never before seen a woman in a Nurse's Army uniform.*

*After being discharged from the services, you continued your nursing career spending time in remote areas of Western Queensland. Your dedication won you a Florence Nightingale Scholarship to London where you studied to become a Nurse Educator. This also took you to European Hospitals to observe methods of teaching and general procedures. You were then chosen to represent Australian Nurses at an International conference in Taiwan. While there, you were presented to Chiang Kai*

*Shek. Your return to Australia saw you obtain the position of Tutor Sister at the Brisbane General Hospital – a position you held for many years.*

*Another grant took you to America to study Psychiatric Nursing. On returning you were offered the position of Tutor Sister to an all male nursing staff at the Goodna Mental Hospital. A task many thought beyond a woman. Your down-to-earth approach plus your experience in human behaviour proved the critics wrong.*

*Achieving a Diploma in Chiropody enabled you to practise at home after your retirement from your nursing career to which you had dedicated your life. Ill health eventually saw you return to the town of your birth. Here you spent the remaining years of your life, lovingly cared for by the devoted staff of the Herberton Nursing Home. Dearly loved by family and friends, you will always be remembered for your warmth, generosity and wit.*

My thoughts were brought to reality with a tug on my hand. My grand daughter saying "Can we cross the street now. The cars have all gone." My eyes and thoughts were still with the funeral cortege as we crossed.

Valrie Elizabeth Smith, you and the thousands of nurses and sisters like you who gave their youth, and in some cases their lives, so that people like us can be free, we thank you. The world should never forget your courage and caring devotion to all fellow human beings.

Lieutenant Valrie Smith, I salute you.