

16, Orange Grove,
Kensington Park.

27th April, 1942.

A letter of yours has just arrived dated 7th March, and I can't answer it fast enough to assure you that I am perfectly well and safe at home. I am sending a cable off with this and hope that it will waste no time in getting to you, for I can't bear to think of you writing those dismal pages each week to a prisoner who isn't. I do hope that you have heard news of your Edna Aldworth by now, but I don't feel very hopeful for the nurses from the Singapore General for we have heard nothing of a lass we knew there - Mary Uniache.

I am dreadfully sorry that you have been so worried about me and feel a perfect wretch for not cabling you before. I did write you a brief note in answer to your letter about Edna, but either it has not reached you yet or it has been lost. That note of yours didn't reach me till late in January when we were up in Johore and working at the double, so I didn't have a chance of looking her up. If I had known about her in the early days I could easily have found her out because, while we were waiting for our own hospital to be put in running order, we used to go and work at the General several mornings each week. Fancy our being so near each other all that time!

I wouldn't have missed one day of our time in Malaya even with the Japs thrown in. It was a marvellous experience (especially now that I know I got through it alright!) and all so worth while and full of interest and excitement. The one thing that saddens all our memory of it is that none of our men (M.O's and orderlies) and only half the girls got out. We have heard nothing of them at all and can only hope that they are all together and are being allowed to carry on as a hospital - it seems a lot to hope for.

We had to evacuate the hospital from Johore to Singapore when the Japs were extremely hot on our heels, and we completed the whole withdrawal in two days, which was pretty good going, seeing that we were then close on 1200 beds and people told us that no A.G.H. could be removed under 6 weeks! You just should have seen us pelting up and down stairs with mattresses on our heads and iron bedsteads practically tucked under our arms. I have never seen people work so hard, or so cheerfully. One of our junior M.O's was heard to remark at one stage "Let's have a rest boys - let's carry mattresses".

By the end of the second day nothing was left in Johore - not even the fixed wash hand basins, and all the patients were in bed in Singapore. One ward admitted 80 patients and had them in bed and asleep in three-quarters of an hour.

Once the Japs got on to the island we turned into a casualty clearing station, and were admitting men straight from the front line. The 3 of us (masseuses) spent practically all our time in the theatre as we did all the plaster work, and the routine treatment of wounds after excision was to dust them with sulphonilamide powder, and pack them with vaseline gauze, and put them in a closed plaster. When we were not plastering, we were acting as theatre pros or as "secretaries" to the surgeons, who couldn't spare the time to write up descriptions of the operation in case notes. If there was ever a lull in the theatre, we went into the resuscitation ward and helped to "cope" in there. We took it in turns to work back at night, one of us working right through till morning, another staying till the rush was over, usually about 2 a.m., and the third SLEEPING.

We collected only one bomb on the hospital, which was quite good seeing that we were between the docks, the airport, and ack-ack defences. Every day we would hear them dropping around us and quite often the buildings rattled and shook, but the Japs did respect the red cross and I believe the one that got us was the last of a stick which was jettisoned by a bomber in full flight.

It happened most unexpectedly one night at about 10 o'clock. There had been no siren, no sound of planes or thud of bombs, and the night was calm and still when suddenly "WHOOOSH" ~~flat as a table~~ cloth I was, and on the top step of our verandah! In the midst of an exploding world I continued to think with painful clarity (A) that the top step was a BAD place to be in (B) that my tin hat was under my bed (C) that my legs seemed very long and exposed (D) that the bomb was going on and on like an overgrown "jumping jack" (E) that any moment I would find out what being wounded was like. At last the incredible noise stopped and I rose cautiously bit by bit and people came running from all directions to see if there were any wounded. Miraculously there were none. The bombs had fallen in a stick along the coast in front of our bungalows, but in the sea which was a few yards away from our front doors, with the exception of the last one which had hit the only spot in the hospital that didn't matter - the end of a big ward which was cleared and set with mess tables. It had then bounced off a balcony beneath, onto the cook-house roof and exploded in the cook-house, which was empty.

We had all resigned ourselves to the idea of staying in Singapore and taking what was to come as the Japs were fighting only three miles away and the shelling (much worse than any bomb) was constant and uncomfortably near. We slept and woke to the constant din and every day the filthy pall of smoke over everything grew thicker and smellier, and our bungalows shook more and more as the shells got nearer, so we were amazed when the C.O. appeared with a list of names and said that the following girls were to be ready to leave the next morning. There were thirty of us from each of the 2 Australian Hospitals. That was the worst moment of the war. Thankful as we were to think that we could be rescued, it was cruel having to leave everyone else. Fortunately we had been able to get all our really helpless cases away on a hospital ship, but that didn't make it easier

to leave the others.

We went down to the docks in ambulance convoys after having grabbed a few things together in small cases and rolled a few more up in rugs or ground-sheets, and there we saw our ship - a cargo ship which normally had accommodation for about 16 passengers and was carrying 2,500 troops, nurses and civilians.

We were stowed down the hold and thrown tinned provisions "salvaged" from the wharves - rusks, cheese, stew, biscuits, bottles of Guinness's stout and skin food ("revive those sagging facial muscles")! It was dusk before we sailed and we watched Singapore, blazing from end to end, out of sight. There was just room for us to lie down in the hold and we lay flat on ground sheets and sweated as I have never sweated before.

The next day at 9 a.m. we heard planes again and the order went round to take cover as the Japs were after us. We lay flat in our hold for four hours while flights of planes numbering in all 60 dive and high-level bombed us consistently. How we survived it no one understood, least of all the Captain, who said he had never experienced anything like it in this war or the last, and never expected to bring us through it. Over and over again the bombs would drop encircling us completely so that the ship kept right on of the water, and flopped back again with a frightful wrench and a shudder, and yet we were only hit four times. Fourteen people were killed and twenty wounded, so we organized ourselves into a hospital once more and took 4 hour shifts on duty. Two British (English) corporals were our "refuge and help" in all this. They were priceless Yorkshiremen who were tireless in keeping everyone cheerful (rocking with laughter in fact) and organising community singing and general buffoonery. They were much funnier than they realized.

Next day we made Batavia and from then on our journey was uneventful. Did you know that Lovat (Kay's Lovat) is a prisoner in Java? They were sent there right at the last gasp and we know no more than that.

I must finish this screed. I do hope you hear good news of Edna and that we all have something to cheer us up soon.

Lots of love,