Mona Margaret Wilton, 13th AGH, VX61225
*(Information supplied by her brother, Tom Wilton, in Mona's memory.)*
*Photograph ©copyright to the family of Sr. M.M. Wilton.*
Born on 8th August 1914 at Hamilton Hospital, Mona's father Frederick was a blacksmith and her mother Christina (nee Stewart) was a nurse. She had an older sister Amy and later a younger brother Tom. The family lived in Willaura, Victoria, with Mona beginning her education at Willaura State School. In 1924 the family moved to Naringal, near Warrnambool when Frederick purchased a farm and Mona continued her schooling at Naringal State School. In 1928 she went to stay with an aunt, Mrs George Meyers in Brighton and attended the Mordialloc and Carrum High School for 1 year. She then returned to the farm at Naringal and worked as sewing mistress at Naringal State School until 1933. She played tennis with the Allansford Tennis Club and attended the Allansford Presbyterian Church where, for a time, she was organist for church services.
In 1933, she joined her sister Amy as a nurse at Warrnambool Hospital, completing her training in General Nursing after 3 years, after which she obtained her Midwifery Certificate. While Mona was training, she met Wilma Oram and the two became firm friends. On completing her training, Mona did some private nursing around Warrnambool and then went to Daylesford as Head Sister for a time.
She kept in touch with her nursing friend Wilma. In 1939, Mona decided to join the AANS. She began training at Darley near Bacchus Marsh. It was Mona who persuaded Wilma Oram to join the Australian Army Nursing Service and eventually they both found themselves attached to the 13th AGH. After their final leave, the two nurses boarded the *Wanganella* in 1941, expecting to go to the Middle East.
Arriving instead on September 15th at Singapore where they initially set up a hospital at St Patrick's School. Mona expressed disappointment in her letters as it seemed at first to the nurses that they were on holiday.  Next they transferred to Johore Bahru where they set up the 13th AGH. However, soon after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour the invaders approached overland from the north and the nurses and their patients had to retreat to Singapore.
Mona's family reports: "Tent hospitals had been erected as there were many wounded soldiers coming in to be looked after. The nurses also had to contend with Japanese planes directing their Tbombs at the hospital.” After the retreat of all units to Singapore members of the 13th AGH set up hospital again at St Patrick's School, where they had been stationed when they first arrived. The situation rapidly became hopeless and nurses of all units, extremely unwilling to leave wounded soldiers behind, were ordered to evacuate by sea in various requisitioned ships. Mona's family reports: "Mona was one of the group that boarded the Vyner Brooke (12th February 1942). When the small ship was bombed and sunk by the Japanese, Mona and her friend Wilma were in the water together as the ship went down. Mona was not seen again after the ship listed onto them and sank." (For eye witness accounts of the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*)
Mona's vivacious personality is remembered fondly by her family and friends, and is preserved in the optimistic and often funny letters that she wrote to her nursing colleagues at home.

    Photographs supplied by Graeme Saunders

A stained glass window at the Warrnambool Base Hospital commemorates Mona Wilton, who was killed in the sinking of the *Vyner Brooke*during World War Two. It was unveiled by her friend Wilma in 1953 as a tribute from all the nurses.

Of the 65 Australian nurses embarked upon the *Vyner Brooke*, 12 were killed during the air attack or drowned following the sinking (see list below).Approximately 150 survivors - including 22 of the original 65 nurses - eventually made it ashore at Bangka Island, after periods of between eight and 65 hours in the water.
The island had already been occupied by the Japanese and most of the survivors were taken captive.
However, an awful fate awaited many of those that landed on Radji beach. There, survivors from the *Vyner Brooke* joined up with another party of civilians and up to 60 Commonwealth servicemen and merchant sailors, who had made it ashore after their own vessels were sunk. After an unsuccessful effort to gain food and assistance from local villagers, a deputation led by an officer of the *Vyner Brooke* was sent to contact the Japanese in Muntok, with the aim of having the group taken prisoner.

While he was away Matron Irene Melville Drummond suggested that the civilian women and children should leave for Muntok, which they did. The nurses stayed to care for the wounded. They set up a shelter with a large Red Cross sign on it.
At mid-morning the ship’s officer returned with about 20 Japanese soldiers.
They ordered all the wounded men capable of walking to travel around a headland. The nurses heard a quick succession of shots before the Japanese soldiers came back, sat down in front of the women and cleaned their bayonets and rifles.
A Japanese officer ordered the remaining 22 nurses and one British civilian woman to walk into the surf. A machine gun was set up on the beach and when the women were waist deep, they were machine-gunned.

All but Sister Lt Vivian Bullwinkel were killed. Wounded soldiers left on stretchers were then bayoneted and killed. Shot in the diaphragm, Bullwinkel lay motionless in the water until the sound of troops had disappeared. She crawled into the bush and lay unconscious for several days.
When she awoke, she encountered Private Patrick Kingsley, a British soldier that had been one of the wounded from the ship, and had been bayoneted by the Japanese soldiers but survived. She dressed his wounds and her own, and then 12 days later they surrendered to the Japanese. Kingsley died before reaching a POW camp, but Bullwinkel spent 3 years in one. She survived the war and gave evidence of the massacre at a war crimes trial in Tokyo in 1947. Of the remaining nurses who survived the Vyner Brooke sinking - 32 became internees, 8 of whom subsequently died before the end of the war.
Only 24 nurses from the original 65 aboard the Vyner Brooke made it safely back to Australia three and half years later.

Melbourne's Nurses Memorial Centre (NMC) in St Kilda Road is directly connected to the Bangka Island story. The following background information is sourced from the NMC website:
*"It is a ‘living memorial’ to the heroism and sacrifice of the 77 Australian nurses who died in World War Two or survived years in prisoner-of-war camps during that time. Two worlds apart the vision of a living memorial was being formulated, on one side by Edith Hughes-Jones in Melbourne and on the other side by the nurses in captivity.
Our founders Vivian Bullwinkel and Betty Jeffery, were first hand survivors of the war. Vivian was sole survivor, of 22 captured nurses, of the Radji Beach massacre on Banka Isand. Betty Jeffrey kept a diary whilst in captivity and this was published in a book called ‘White Coolies’ which subsequently inspired the film ‘Paradise Road’ directed by Bruce Beresford to be made. Upon their return home after 3 ½ years of captivity, Betty Jeffrey and Vivian Bullwinkel, with the support of colleagues Wilma Oram-Young, Colonel Annie Sage, Edith Hughes-Jones , and others, toured around Victoria in a little Austin car to raise funds for the establishment of the centre. They visited every hospital in Victoria with more than 20 beds to explain to their nursing colleagues how they hoped to make their vision of a living memorial a reality. A living memorial was not just to remember the passing of the fallen nurses but continue the ongoing professional development of nurses through education. A variety of fundraising activities was undertaken to raise the money needed, and this was the most successful appeal ever held in Victoria at the time.*

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| Bangka Island Memorial, Indonesia, This was unveiled by Vivian Bullwinkel in 1992. |