

Prologue

A WORLD OF FEVER AND PAIN

From the memoir of Captain Pilkington, Alexandra Military Hospital, Singapore, February 1942:

From my bed I had a splendid view of the battle of Singapore. I could watch the docks and town being bombed, the fighting on the hills, on the island. In fact there was little I missed.

The officers' wards were at the top of the hospital on the third floor, open on both sides with broad balconies and very cool all day: a continuous draught blew over me.

My temperature was seldom below 103 and generally well over 104. I lived in a world of fever and pain with happy hours in between when I had Morphia and sleeping draughts. My wounded shoulder was suppurating so badly that not only was it padded with cotton wool six inches deep but thick bath towels were placed underneath me and these had to be changed every four hours. I was gradually able to use my free arm and legs and do little things like feeding myself and lighting my own pipe.

On Wednesday February 11 some 500 patients from another hospital that had been bombed were moved in while the hospital was under fire. We were now so thickly packed that patients were lying on mattresses in the passages and on the balconies.

Twenty-five more sisters were evacuated (yesterday, fifty of the sisters, much against their wills, were evacuated), and the hospital had been completely deserted by its Chinese and Eurasian staff who had bolted to a man.

The hospital was continuously under shell and mortar fire with

the doctors and sisters working in steel helmets. Tiles and roofing were flying all over the place. It was terrible to hear the howls and shrieks of the shell-shocked patients every time a gun went off.

A direct hit from a mortar bomb on the tiled roof above our ward caused one of the sisters to raise her helmet and say, 'Come in. You needn't knock so loudly, I'm not deaf!'

A new bed had been prepared for me. A wooden fracture bed with an ordinary mattress, on top of which was a big Dunlopillo one with linen sheets and huge feather pillows. A big argument took place as to the best method of getting me into bed, aggravated by my remark that I weighed 16½ stone without the masonry. However, four orderlies and three sisters rallied round and I was lifted most gently into bed. I have never known anything so comfortable, and veritably floated on air. Underneath my bed, with its two mattresses and my lovely plastered body, was a refuge for all during the air raids and it always surprised me the number of people who could get under it in an emergency!

I was operated on again during February 12 when my plaster cast was renewed in a desperate attempt to get me away on a hospital ship, but it was not to be. They considered me far too weak and said I could never survive the handling and journey.

We were on a liquid ration of half a coffee cupful of water three times a day as the water main had been hit. Fortunately I had a large thermos flask full of water as well as some bottles of soda which kept my feverish thirst at bay for a bit. Our food was now cut down to two meals a day of one piece of stale bread and marmalade.

By midday all patients who were fit to walk had been told to find their way to Singapore.

Later on, a heavy raid was made on the oil tanks in the vicinity of the hospital and, although we had been told that they were all empty, they succeeded in burning for three weeks, making the night ghastly with their red glow while, during the daytime, great clouds of black smoke drifted through the hospital, making it sometimes difficult to breathe.

Friday morning showed that the electric power lines had been hit

so that now, added to our thirst, was the intense heat of a room full of feverish patients, with no fans working and no doors open. The rest of the sisters were evacuated.

Friday night passed in an inferno of noise and light, but now our thirst was nearly unbearable with many officers delirious.

On the morning of February 14, the battle was raging in the hospital grounds, with our own artillery now searching for the Japs amongst the oil wells [actually oil storage tanks]. At 14:00 the Japs put in a full-scale attack in this area driving back the British and Indian troops, who withdrew through the hospital wards. For an hour they were firing from the balconies and windows but were gradually driven out. A great many patients had been killed. The Japanese had thrown hand grenades wherever there was resistance, smashing theatres, dispensary and kitchen, and killing patients, doctors, and even bayoneting people on the operating tables.

By 15:00 the hospital was in Jap hands and — except for an occasional bullet from one of our snipers — the battle had died down.

The Japs now took matters into their own hands. They paraded every walking wounded, marched them out of the hospital, tied them in sixes to the trees near the burning oil wells, bayoneted them and threw their bodies into the fire. One officer escaped to tell the tale.

Next they removed all the doctors and orderlies and divided them into two parties. One lot of 100 they locked up in a barrack block near the hospital without water and food, collecting them the next day in batches of ten, when they were taken to the rear and mown down by machine-gun fire. Two orderlies escaped to tell the tale.

The two hundred remaining doctors, orderlies and hospital staff were marched off to a deep drain at the rear of the hospital where their hands were tied behind their backs and they were kept till 12:00 next morning without water and food, when they were allowed to return to the hospital till 17:00 and this procedure was repeated on Sunday night.

By now the hospital was denuded of everyone except those absolutely bed-ridden. We were warned that there must be no smoking or talking.

The night was a ghastly nightmare. The flashes of the guns turned the night into almost blinding daylight which, with the burning oil

wells, would have given Dante a good idea of a real inferno.

People tried to quieten delirious patients. No one in our ward could do more than move about slightly in bed and there was no one to carry out the normal sanitary procedure with the result that, to the stench of suppurating wounds, was added every type of smell.

I was trying to read *Gone with the Wind* and naturally had got to the part where the hospital was under fire.

By nightfall all the stray dogs of Singapore appeared to be in the hospital and rushed, barking and growling, up and down the wards. One officer had had an abdominal operation for which a tube was used to drain the wound. The dogs got hold of one end of this and a tug of war then ensued. The dogs eventually won.

For 24 hours we had no food or water. At 12:00 next day the orderlies and doctors still surviving were allowed to return. In a few hours they worked wonders and by 17:00 we had all had a meal of sorts, were cleaned up and comfortable.

During Sunday 15 February our own guns were ordered to fire on the hospital and they proved to be far more accurate than the Japs — with a few salvoes they completely demolished the top floor of one wing and removed most of the roof elsewhere. Two shells burst on the stairwell by our ward and for two hours bits of shrapnel and ceiling rained down on us like snow. Added to the inferno were the choking thick fumes of cordite.

At 18:00 all firing stopped and we heard the sirens sounding the All Clear, immediately followed by the 'Banzais' of the Jap soldiers. An eerie calm then fell across the island. Singapore had fallen.

This episode, which became known as the Alexandra Hospital Massacre, does not rate a single word in *History of the Second World War: The War Against Japan* by S. Woodburn Kirby, the official British history. Its Australian counterpart, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945: The Japanese Thrust*, by Lionel Wigmore, affords the episode a scant half dozen lines.

But unbelievably, worse — much worse — lay ahead for Pilkington and his beleaguered men who were now prisoners of war of the Imperial Japanese Army.

