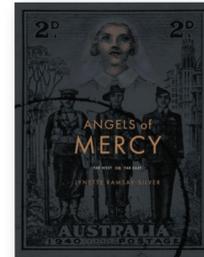


BOOK REVIEW:

Angels of mercy: far west, far east

by Lynette Ramsay Silver

Sally Milner Publishing: Binda, NSW; 2019; 442 pp.; ISBN 978186315009 (paperback);
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This book is a biography of two Australian nursing sisters – Marjorie Silver, who served in remote communities in New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory; and Pat Darling, who served with the 8th Australian Division in World War II and became a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese. The book also lists the names of the women who served in World War II as Army doctors and as Army, Navy and Air Force nurses.

The author, Lynette Ramsay Silver AM, a member of the Institute, is a well-respected military historian and battlefield guide, noted for her forensic research into the prisoner-of-war experience in Southeast Asia. This is her 13th book on Australian military history.

The two stories in this book offer contrasting accounts of the lives of Marjorie and Pat, both nurses facing considerable challenges in very different parts of the world. Both stories celebrate the strength, capable determination, and resilience of these adventurous women.

Marjorie's story centres on her career as a flying nurse in outback Australia in the 1930s. Her experience of travelling by plane to visit patients in remote areas pre-dates the arrival of the Flying Doctor Service and is a surprising revelation about the early use of planes to reach patients in remote areas. This story is enjoyable and offers some wry humour on the personalities Marjorie encounters: the industrious Mr. Drummond, the driving force behind the Far West Children's Health Scheme, whose brainwave it is to launch an aerial medical service; and the strong minded 19-year-old Nancy, the young pilot who delivers Marjorie to her patients in a Leopard Moth.

After her work based in Bourke, and later at a clinic at Mt Margaret station in Queensland, Marjorie moves in the 1960s to Brunette Downs station in the Northern Territory, where she continues her nursing work at the station's hospital and becomes involved with the local indigenous community. This story delivers the satisfying sense of a life well-lived.

Pat's story is a rather different proposition, as she journeys from the normal comforts of everyday life into an almost unbelievable experience of deprivation and adversity. The tipping point comes, quite literally, when Pat is on a boat trying to escape from Singapore. The boat is strafed by Japanese fighter planes. Suddenly, everyone must abandon ship and scramble onto the lifeboats: "As the crew lowered the first boat, filled with women and children, one of the lines broke, spilling the passengers into the sea".

It is clear that life is about to change dramatically.

Pat's pragmatic reaction in this moment – so normal and unfazed – is very poignant in the face of what is likely to come: "Before slipping into the sea, I gave my tin hat to Kath in case she needed to help bail water and told her that we would see her on the beach".

Pat is captured on Bangka Island and interned in a series of Japanese prison camps in Sumatra. The account of the camaraderie and privations that Pat and her fellow inmates experience provides a detailed historical record of life in the camps. The author has also performed extensive research to describe what ultimately happened to many of the individuals in the story – who was rescued, what their life became afterwards, and those who did not make it.

These two stories are told through the voices of the women themselves. Their first-hand accounts, drawn from memoirs and interviews, are expanded by the author with additional narrative sections that provide more context about the events described, and include many additional interesting facts about the people in the book.

The author also examines the controversy that can arise when dealing with delicate facts: to what extent should historians delve into material that the protagonists may prefer to leave uncovered? The forensic examination uncovering the 'secret' in the second story presents information and conclusions about events which the women themselves chose never to speak about. The author lays this dilemma bare, including comments made by the women themselves about how to handle this 'secret'. There is an additional overlay to this dilemma: the government of the day also may have exerted some pressure to suppress some of the details.

Anyone who has a connection with the times and the people mentioned in the book will find the nominal rolls and details in the appendices especially interesting. There are also many historical photographs throughout the book, a select bibliography and index, and some useful maps – including a depiction of the infamous Radji beach.

This book makes a significant contribution to the historical record of the Australian prisoner-of-war experience in Sumatra during World War II. It will appeal to readers who enjoy biography, and there is also appeal here for students of history who are interested in the process of how the historical record is pieced together.

Debbie Case