

Murdered nurses were probably raped by Japanese officers, says academic

By NORMAN ABJOESEN

A group of 21 Australian army nurses, massacred by Japanese troops on Banka Island in World War II, almost certainly were raped by soldiers before being killed, but the rape was covered up to protect their memory, according to a Japanese researcher.

Only one nurse survived the ordeal, Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, and she made no mention of rape in her account to Australian authorities.

Reports of the mass killing horrified and enraged a stunned Australia at the time.

In a paper to be delivered today to an international conference on Japan at the Australian National

University, Yuki Tanaka, now teaching at Melbourne University, says evidence suggests that Sister Bullwinkel "did not tell the truth at the investigation in order to save her dead colleagues from the disgrace as being known as victims of rape."

The nurses were ordered to walk into the sea on Banka and were machine-gunned by soldiers standing on the beach.

Sister Bullwinkel, although wounded, was left for dead, but later made her way back to land.

The nurses had been evacuated from Singapore on February 11, 1942, four days before Singapore fell to the Japanese, but the vessel carrying them, the *Viner Brooke*,

was bombed by Japanese aircraft and sunk between Sumatra and Banka Island. Many on board drowned, including 12 Australian nurses, and the others floated for up to four days before reaching Banka. They were captured by Japanese, separated from the men, mostly British soldiers, and shot. At the time, all were wearing the uniform of the Australian Military Nursing Service and Red Cross armbands.

Mr Tanaka says it is significant that the bodies of bayoneted British soldiers were left on the beach, but that the Japanese had made sure that the evidence of the women's bodies would not be left behind.

Immediately after the war, Australian military investigators set out to find the perpetrators — some soldiers from O Battalion of the 229th regiment who, as it turned out, were already being investigated by the British for the rape and murder of nurses in Hong Kong two months earlier.

The soldiers' commander, taken prisoner by the Russians after the war, was returned to Tokyo but committed suicide before he could be interrogated.

According to Mr Tanaka: "It is quite possible from the documents of both the British and Australian investigation that the soldiers who massacred the Australian nurses in Banka Island were the same sol-

diers who had raped and murdered the British nurses in Hong Kong. . . . It is for this reason that it is quite possible that the Australian nurses were raped before they were killed."

Mr Tanaka's paper makes it clear that the Japanese were by no means the only rapists, and he documents recent Japanese research which points to Australian troops being involved in systematic rape of Japanese civilians at Kure with the occupation forces in October, 1945.

A Japanese prostitute, recruited by police to act as a "firebreak", told a researcher: "The Australian soldiers were the worst. They dragged young women into their

jeeps, took them to the mountain, and then raped them. I heard them screaming for help nearly every night."

Mr Tanaka, who has made an extensive study of rape in war and the Japanese use of "comfort women" (women, mostly foreigners, forced to become prostitutes) argues that "war and rape are the same sorts of thing; they are fundamentally related to one another."

He says one "fantasy of war" is that it is an exclusively masculine activity and patriarchal ideology holds that a woman's place is on the home front, not in battle.

"While this ideology demands that women be absent from battle, its maintenance also requires that

such dominance [over the weaker sex] be repeatedly reinforced; this is especially so when women are in fact present in the male domain of the battlefield, either as implicated civilians, or as military nurses," he said.

Mr Tanaka says military nurses are victims of such violence, not only because they are in close proximity to the front line.

Also, their military status — signified most graphically by their presence in uniform — marks them as "boundary-crossers"; women who are fully integrated into a male activity.

"This may explain the massacre of the nurses in Banka Island," he said.



Sister Vivian Bullwinkel: from a portrait by Shirley Bourné.