

My story begins with my decision to train as a nurse. On reflection, it was what I had always wanted to do, but my mind was finally made up when I was 23, after I had worked for several years as a children's nurse.

I discussed my decision with my parents, and after making various enquiries about Hospital Training Schools in London and the provinces, I eventually decided that the East Suffolk and Ipswich Hospital (as it was then called) served my purposes best, as it had an excellent Training School for nurses, with good opportunities for practical experience.

My application was accepted, and I started my training in 1930. It was hard work, with long hours and little time off-duty, during which lectures had to be attended. But they were happy days, despite the hard work, and I made many friends.

During my training, I was doing a period of Night Duty, and on my nights off, I usually visited friends. On this occasion, I visited some friends who owned a farm just outside Ipswich. Their son, John, was a school-master at the local Grammar School. He was a shy, quiet, precise young man, who had been taking dancing lessons and he asked me if I would like to go to a Supper Dance at The Great White Horse Hotel with him. As I was on leave I was able to stay overnight with his parents, instead of having to return to the Nurses' Home by 10.00 p.m. John and I met up with some other young friends at the dance. During an interval, I happened to glance at the Ballroom door, and there stood a tall, bronzed, handsome young man, dressed in an immaculate dinner jacket. I was immediately attracted to him. I asked who he was, and John, who had been at school with him replied, "That is Eric Reeve just back on leave from Malaya". We called him over, and invited him to join our party. I'm sure it was love at first sight. We danced together, and I asked him to have supper with us. During supper, John mentioned that he would like me to see the School Play the next day, but as he was in the play himself, he couldn't pick me up from the farm. So Eric offered to call for me, and after that, we met on several occasions during my off-duty times and we became close friends.

Six months later, Eric returned to Malaya, and eventually we lost touch with one another. I took my Nursing Finals, and then a course in Midwifery, Children's Nursing and Public Health Nursing. One day, I noticed an advertisement in a Nursing Journal for a Nursing Sister in Malaya. It stated that only London trained Nurses need apply. However, I decided to apply, and during the interview I was asked what I was doing at the time. On telling them, I was told to finish my Public Health Training, as I was just the type of person they required. I thought that it was just a good excuse and a kind way of telling me that I was an unsuccessful applicant. However, just as I had sat my final exams, I received a pre-paid telegram offering me the post of Nursing Sister in Malaya. Within a month, I was sailing on the P. & O. Liner Kaiser-i-Hind for Malaya.

I was appointed to the General Hospital in Singapore, as Sister on the Children's Ward. At first I was not very happy because I was worried at the number of tiny babies of which I was in charge. Although there was quite a big staff of excellent Chinese Nurses, I felt that many babies weren't receiving the attention they should. Also, there were many deaths among the children.

One evening, after writing up the day's report, I idly thumbed through the telephone directory, and came across the name E.W. Reeve. I dialled the number, and asked to speak to Mr. Reeve. It was Eric, and he immediately knew my voice. He asked when I had arrived, as he had been down to meet every ship, except the Kaiser-i-Hind, which was on her last voyage before being scrapped. In view of this, he thought it most unlikely that the Government would send me out on it. Apparently he had read about my appointment as Nursing Sister in the London Gazette. Eric could have been working anywhere in the Peninsula, but fate stationed him in Singapore. We dined together that night, and spent as much time together as possible.

I had many other male friends, but Eric remained constant, and eventually asked me to marry him. I was having a wonderful time, going to Dances, Dinners, Night Clubs, Swimming Club events and to the Raffles Hotel for Saturday morning Pimms etc. I didn't want to get married just then, but he asked me again and again, and eventually I gave in. As I hadn't finished my 3 year tour, Eric had to buy me out of my contract, and we were married at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Singapore, on 12th July, 1938. Three days later, we sailed for England on furlough on the P. & O. Liner Stratheden.

After 6 months leave we returned to Malaya early in 1939, and Eric was appointed Headmaster of the Government English School in Malacca. We had a small old Dutch-Portuguese House overlooking the Malacca Club. It had marble floors, and pillars in the dining room, but a rickety wooden upstairs, consisting of a lounge; a balcony which ran the whole length of the house, 2 bedrooms and a shaky built-on bathroom at the back, containing a large earthenware jar (Ali-Baba) and an elsan.

A large modern house was under construction at the foot of Pringgit Hill, with stippled walls (the very latest idea), and everyone wondered to whom it would be allocated. To our amazement and delight, it was offered to us, as Eric was the most Senior Government Official in Malacca at the time. We were thrilled, especially after the house in Fort Terrace.

We gave many parties, and led a hectic social life. We attended tea-parties and dinner-parties at the Residency. We played golf and tennis. Eric played hockey and cricket for Malacca. We joined the Swimming Club and the Malacca Club, and went to all the social events there, we played Bridge and Mah Jong, and Eric played Chess. The very latest films were shown at the one picture house and after the show, we usually had a stengah and a dance round the floor at the Dance Hall next door, before going home.

We had been married for 18 months when Rosemary was born in Singapore on 21.1.40, and we were deliriously happy, but even at that time I had a nagging premonition that something dreadful was going to happen.

Some months later, while Rosemary was playing on her druggel in the lounge, and the Boy had brought us our usual evening Stengah, I blurted out my nagging premonition. "We are far too happy, we have a beautiful baby; positions; a lovely home; servants and money, but I feel something dreadful is going to happen". I remember to this day, the quizzical look my husband gave me.

The War had been raging in England for about 2 years by this time, but we still felt quite safe in the Far East. It was decided, however, to start a Blood Bank in Malacca, and to practise attending bomb casualties. I volunteered, and helped at the Blood Bank by identifying Blood Groups. I was also given an old Ambulance, which I had to equip with dressings, splints etc. I had to scrounge these when and where I could. Black-outs were started now and again for practice, and when the siren sounded, I had to go to the hospital nearby to get my ambulance. Then I was sent out to a certain location, where I would find someone groaning and screaming with a realistic wound plaque attached to him. The show would often attract quite a crowd of on-lookers. I had to dress the "wound" and bundle the person into the Ambulance and race back to the Hospital. Once I had to apply a splint to a "broken" leg. The casualty was rather a big man, and he insisted that the driver and I should carry him back to the Ambulance. After carrying him a few steps we couldn't manage any more, so we dropped him, and made him hop the rest of the way, despite his protests.

Then came the bomb-shell with the sinking of the 2 battleships, the Repulse and the Prince of Wales on 10th December 1941, in the Straits of Johore. We were all dumb founded. It couldn't be true. It must be a rumour; it wasn't possible, but alas, it was true. Eric ordered the Kubun (Gardener) to dig a large trench at the end of the garden, under some rubber trees, and told the servants that in the event of an air-raid, they were to get into the trench with their families, together with Amah, Rosemary and me. Our white house, alone at the foot of the hill, stood out like a sore thumb and would have been an easy target, especially on a moonlight night.

At the beginning of January 1942, Eric was called up with the 4th Battalion Malacca Volunteer Force, and was sent to Singapore. He rang me most nights, but eventually decided that I should travel down to Johore to stay with friends as the Japanese were infiltrating into the northern part of Malaya through the rubber plantations on bicycles, and landing in small groups by boat along the coast. I was most reluctant to leave my beautiful home and my faithful servants. Amah was upset and tearful at the thought of leaving Rosemary, but we eventually left sometime towards the middle of January, with only a suitcase each. I pleaded with the Syce to drive us to Johore and even offered him the car as a reward. We drove down country by the inland road, between rubber trees and isolated Malay Kampongs, as the main road was unsafe. Near to Johore a lone 'plane flew overhead and we hurriedly scrambled into the nearest storm drain. We heard the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire, but all was well, and the car was not hit, and we were safe. Eric came over to Johore the same evening to see us. He seemed worried. The Syce stayed overnight, but refused to take the car, afraid that the Japanese would know that he had worked for Europeans. By this time, the Navy, Army and Air Force had evacuated their women and children from Singapore by ship, but the Government did nothing for us.

The next day, I left Rosemary with our friend's Amah, and went shopping in Singapore. While there the air-raid siren went, and the Japanese dropped bombs on the city. I was in the Restaurant on the top floor of one of the big stores in Raffles place. The staff all disappeared, so the European customers who were left, went into the kitchens, helped ourselves to lunch and left the money at the pay-desk. On leaving the store, I was shocked to see the damage done by the bombing and realized how stupid I had been, and how lucky to have escaped unscathed. I hastily returned to Johore Bahru.

Eric managed to see us as often as his duties allowed. Then one evening towards the end of January 1942, he told me he had bought tickets for us to leave Malaya on the next available ship. He returned the next day, and took us to the Docks. He was not allowed beyond the Dock Gates, and his last words to me were;- "Make for home - I will wire you money". We were only allowed 1 suitcase and 100 Malayan Dollars each, but I had extra dollars in case of emergency, and Rosemary's dolls pram.

While we were on board the ship waiting to sail, bombs were being dropped on the docks and other ships there but luckily we escaped unscathed. I wasn't sure where the ship was supposed to be heading, but eventually we docked at Fremantle, Western Australia. On disembarking, my luggage was nowhere to be found, only the dolls pram. The Red Cross took over, and we went to Perth by 'bus', where we were housed in the University while the students were away on vacation. The Red Cross gave me a change of underwear and some sun-suits for Rosemary, and we were then allocated to various families in and around Perth. A Mrs. Jean McIntyre an Army Major's wife took us in. She was most kind and we stayed with her for nearly 6 weeks. During that time I went to several banks, but failed to find any money wired to me from Singapore. I felt I should try to make arrangements to get back to England, so after 6 weeks we bade goodbye to Jean and thanked her for her kind hospitality. We still remain good friends to-day, although we only stayed for a short while.

We flew from Perth to Sydney in a small 'plane. This had to make frequent refuelling stops in the scrub and desert, and it took us 1½ days to fly across the continent. We had to spend the night at one refuelling depot, and I was so sick I couldn't go into the town with the other passengers, but had to stay at the Airport for the night. On reaching Sydney, we were taken by 'bus and dumped in the middle of the town. Not knowing where to go, and with very little money left, I hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take us to the Wentworth Hotel. I had heard someone mention this hotel, but had no idea how grand it was. They gave me a very strange look at the Reception Desk, as I had no luggage, only a brown paper parcel and Rosemary's dolls pram. Children were not allowed in the dining room, so I had to get a chamber-maid to look after Rosemary while I had a meal, and I had to take food secretly out of the dining room ~~foyer~~.

Again, I went to a bank to find out if I had been wired any money and this time I saw the Manager. He was very sympathetic and I just sat and cried and poured out my whole story - lost luggage; little money; difficulty with meals at the Hotel. He was shocked when he heard that I was staying at the Wentworth, and immediately found me alternative accommodation in a Boarding House just outside Sydney. He also rang round, and discovered that our luggage had been sent to Adelaide, and that money was waiting for me in another bank.

On arriving at our new accommodation, I discovered that they didn't take children either, but I suppose I looked so dejected, they offered to put us up in a flat a few doors away to sleep. For meals, Rosemary and I were placed behind screens in one corner of the dining room. We didn't stay there for long, because I had heard of a Cargo ship leaving for England. We left Sydney eventually, towards the end of March 1942 on the Ulysses, but although I had tickets, we were not on the passenger list, and as all the cabins were taken, we were given a 'cabin in the crew's quarters'. The passengers were mostly refugees from Hong Kong and Malaya, mainly women and children, with a few elderly men. We had life-boat drill three times a day, and everyone had to be present. If anyone failed to answer the roll-call, an Officer was sent to find the missing person, and the whole ship's complement had to wait until they were found.

My life-boat station was on the top boat-deck, and it was difficult to climb up carrying a small child. The cork life-jacket was far too big and heavy for Rosemary who fell down with the weight of it, and I had to bribe one of the crew to cut one down for her.

From Sydney, we sailed to Wellington, New Zealand, where the boat docked for a couple of days. Then we sailed across the Pacific and through the Panama Canal into the Caribbean Sea. One afternoon, I was in our cabin while Rosemary was having her afternoon sleep, when there was a terrific thud and bang, and the alarm bells rang. I gathered Rosemary up, grabbed a small blanked, my "panic bag" containing our marriage certificate, and birth certificates; my husband's will and some Horlicks Malted Milk Tablets and left with our life-jackets for our life-boat stations. On the way upstairs, I met people coming down to their cabins to collect their life-jackets. There was no panic, but I learned that a torpedo had hit the bows of the ship. Life-boats were lowered and we got into them and although the sea was quite rough, we all managed to get way from the ill-fated ship.

Living in the crew's quarters, I was the only woman with a child in our life-boat. The rest were mostly Chinese crew with one or two European Officers. We saw another torpedo streaking through the water and hit the Ulysses mid-ships, and the ship sank very majestically beneath the waves. The Captain and Chief Engineers sailed by us on a raft, and we took them into our life-boat. I remember seeing boxes of cheese and other debris floating around us.

The sea was rough and I was very sick and I suppose I must have had one arm hanging over the side of the boat because the Captain shouted at me, to warn me that there may be sharks around. The boats seemed to drift apart, and twilight came. It began to get cold, and I became increasingly afraid that we would never be rescued. The Chinese crewmen were restless and the Officers had to strike some of them with the oars to restore order. Then, out of the twilight, loomed a big ship. It was an American Destroyer, which had apparently picked up our May Day call. They threw a net over the side of the ship, which stood high out of the water. When my turn came I had to wait my time until the life-boat was near enough so that I could jump and grab the net. I climbed up with Rosemary clinging on to me. Near the top, a sailor grabbed Rosemary by one arm, and I screamed at him, "don't drop my baby". He told me to throw my bag up on deck, but I had seen others doing the same and their bags had landed in the sea, so I ignored him and kept it with me. We had to be quick getting up the net, because the submarine might still have been lurking.

We were taken to the Officer's Ward Room and I noticed a Teddy Bear sitting on a shelf. It looked exactly like the one Rosemary had, but I had left hers in our cabin on the Ulysses. I remarked about it to the Stewardess, who confirmed that it was Rosemary's and that she had picked it up when she was checking our cabin. Rosemary still has the Teddy Bear to this day.

We were given the Officer's Quarters to sleep in. I had a top bunk and as the sea became increasingly rough, the Destroyer dipped and tossed from side to side, and I had the greatest difficulty in holding on to Rosemary and the bunk-rail throughout the night, to avoid being pitched on to the deck.

Later the next day on 13th April 1942, we were landed at Charleston, South Carolina. We were greeted by an enthusiastic crowd, and a band, as we were the first women and children survivors to be landed there. A coach took us to a Hotel, and we were given a hot meal. We were also allowed to send one cable to a relative. I didn't want to frighten or upset my parents, so I sent mine to my brother in New York. He immediately wired to the British Consul to detain me, and he would come to meet me. However, I never received the message from the Consul, and I left for New York by train with the other survivors. On reaching New York, we were taken to another Hotel and the Ladies who made up "Bundles for Britain" gave out clothing. I felt that my brother and his wife - a paediatrician - would see that Rosemary and I had sufficient warm clothing for crossing the Atlantic, so I didn't accept any clothing. The British Consul also loaned us all £20.

My brother finally caught up with us, and took us to his home, but my sister-in-law and I had differences about whether I should stay and work in America, which would mean leaving Rosemary in a creche, or go home. So I decided to return to England, as I had promised Eric. No mention was made about clothing, and I was far too proud to ask them, so I had to go humbly back to the "Bundles for Britain" depot, and ask for warm clothing, at least for Rosemary. That very day, some kind person had donated 100 dollars for the survivors of the torpedoed ship, as we were called, and they decided to take me out shopping. First they bought me a suitcase and then some beautiful clothes for Rosemary, and a blouse suit and overcoat for me.

The American Red Cross organised our passage back to England, and we sailed from New York to Nova Scotia, where we waited for nearly 2 weeks until a convoy of nearly 100 ships had assembled. In the meantime our ship had filled up with survivors from other torpedoed ships. To start with, Canadian Corvettes sailed with us, rounding up any stragglers as it was essential that we all kept together. Halfway across the Atlantic, British Corvettes took over from the Canadians. It was then the wolf-packs of German Submarines became a menace, and many times during the voyage depth charges were dropped. Thanks to the brave sailors manning the Corvettes, all the ships in the convoy arrived safely at Greenock.

Although we were all refugee-survivors, we had to be questioned by the Military Authorities. I was questioned at great length I had more money than the others. Nearly everyone else had spent their money, plus the £20 loaned by the British Consul, but I had saved all mine. I angrily told the Authorities that my husband was a Japanese Prisoner of War and that they should mind their own business, so they let me go.

We were just in time, with the help of a lady from the Women's Voluntary Service to catch the one train leaving for London and home, nearly 3½ months after leaving Singapore.

My husband died working on the Burma-Siam Railway, in December 1943, after various illnesses including having a leg amputated. His death was caused by Jungle Ulcers, dysentery and pellagra.

In 1946, I returned to Malaya and worked first as a Hospital Sister. Then I was transferred to the Preventive Medicine side. I started clinics and trained nurses to look after mothers and babies in Kuala Kangsar, Alor Star and Johore Bahru. Eventually I was appointed Health Matron for the State of Johore until Malaya became independent in 1958, when I retired, and returned to England to live.