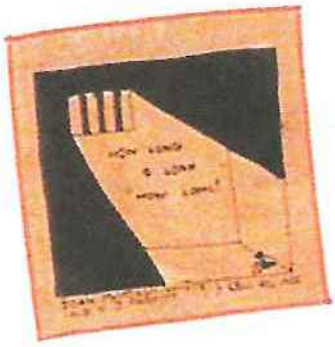
The Changi Quilts

Stitching Solace and Comfort in Captivity

BY JENNY MANNING

"How Long, O Lord How Long!" These poignant words, embroidered on a patchwork quilt in Changi Prison in Singapore in 1942, echoed the desperate feelings of entrapment of all those who found themselves at the mercy of their Japanese captors. Few would have realized at the time that they were to spend the next three and a half years as prisoners-of-war.



Iris Parfitt and Joan McIntosh-Whyte, who shared cell 2G, embroidered the despondent little figure sitting in the shaft of sunlight coming through the bars of her cell window.

Throughout history, women have turned to quiltmaking as a means of telling their stories, expressing their feelings, and often unknowingly, providing messages about their lives and the things that were important to them. During the darkest days of World War II, a group of civilian women, held captive by the Japanese, turned to quiltmaking as a means of passing information to the allied soldiers who were incarcerated in other camps. Each woman stitched her name into a small square, adding embroidered messages and symbols that told the men they had survived. One of the prisoners, Helen Beck, later wrote that the quilts "reveal more clearly than any essay, the secrets of the heart."

Despite living in constant fear, deprivation, and illness, the women were to create four quilts during the first year of their imprisonment. Two of them, now known as the "Australian Quilt" and the "Japanese Quilt," are treasured artifacts belonging to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. The story of these quilts is a remarkable tale of captivity, patriotism, and courage. It is also a story of homesickness, humor, and love, deeply etched into the hearts and minds of many Australians, for few quilts have the power to stir emotions like the Changi Quilts.

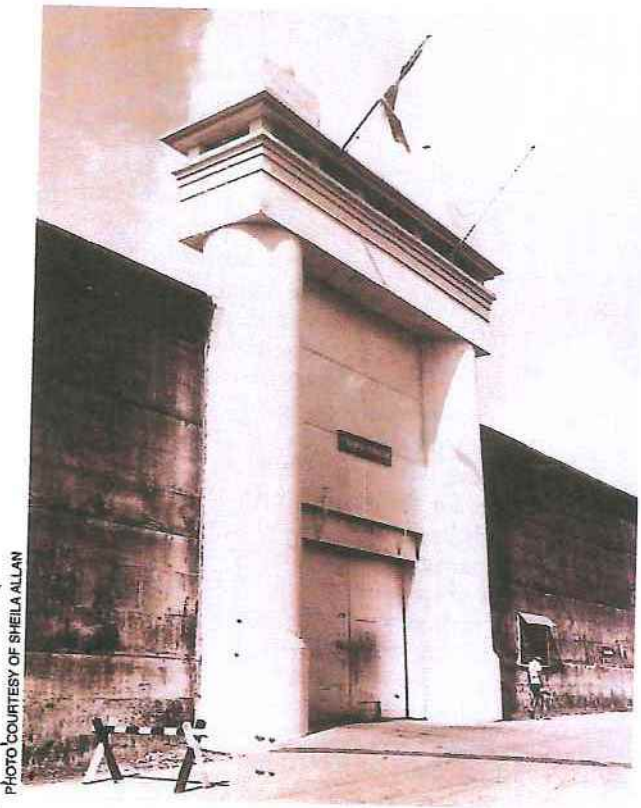


PHOTO COURTESY OF SHEILA ALLAN

The forbidding exterior of Changi Prison, 1946.

I wandered down a long long trail
From Alar Star to Changi Gaol.

These words, by prisoner Dorothy Mather, are embroidered next to a map she created from memory, showing the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Arrows link the towns of Alor Setar, Taiping, Seremban, and Changi. The Japanese landed in northern Malaya on December 7th, 1941, the same day they attacked Pearl Harbor. Their advance down the peninsula was so swift that it took the Allies by surprise. Within a few short weeks, on the 15th of February, 1942, Singapore also fell. Thou-

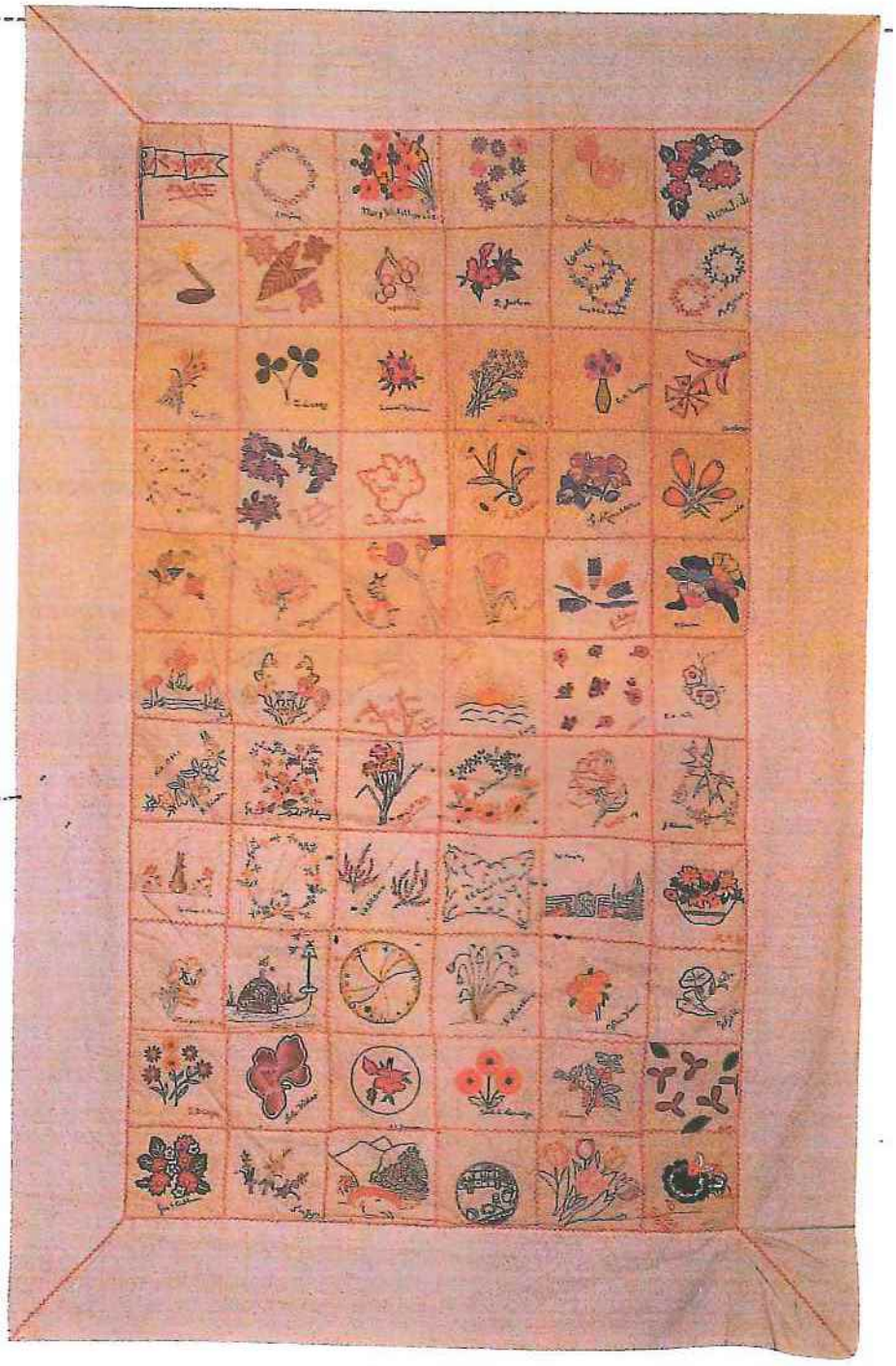
Ethel Mulvaney's block, far left, and others from the Japanese Quilt.

sands of Allied troops surrendered to the enemy forces. Civilians like Dorothy Mather, who had not been evacuated in time, were marched to the notorious Changi Prison where they were to be interned.

The prison building had been designed to hold 600 people. Now it accommodated almost 2,500 and conditions were dreadful. Overcrowding meant that hygiene and sanitation were constant concerns. Civilian men and women were held in separate sections and, although able to see each other, could not communicate. Terrible punishment was inflicted on prisoners for the smallest offense. They were threatened with bayonets if they didn't bow in the presence of Japanese soldiers. The appalling diet of rice and bubu soup, a tasteless mixture of rice and water, led to malnutrition and dysentery; the lack of mosquito netting led to regular bouts of malaria. Tuberculosis was also common, and the longer they were interned, the worse the problems became.

The majority of the women came from Great Britain, others from the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. Despite the many hardships and deprivations, a strong community spirit existed. This spirit triumphed even though the group was extremely diverse. There were many nationalities, differing religious customs, and social backgrounds. Some women, such as the wives of officials in the British colonial administration, were accustomed to having servants. At first they considered it beneath their dignity to contribute to cleaning and other menial tasks, and standing in line for food. In the main, however, everyone did whatever was necessary to make life easier. After the war, Dr. Cicely Williams, chief doctor in the women's camp, commented to those investigating the Japanese treatment of internees: "I recall with pride and gratitude...the unfailing kindness and consideration which I received from all nationalities–even occasionally from some of the Japanese."

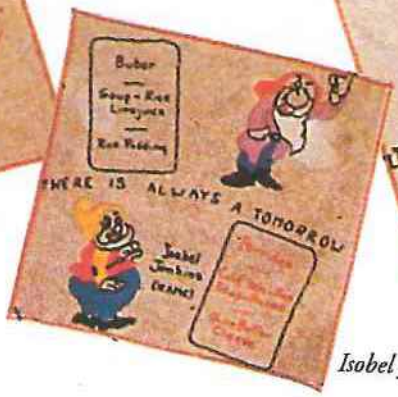
Elizabeth Ennis, a military nurse, had married her fiancé, Dr. Jack Ennis, just four days before the fall of Singapore. They were to spend the next three years apart as prisoners-of-war. Elizabeth embroidered a ship on the Australian Quilt, along with the words "Homeward Bound," depicting her dream of sailing home to Scotland with Jack. These words, along with her signature, told Jack that she was alive and gave him the will to survive. Elizabeth became the camp leader of a group of Girl Guides (an international organization similar to the Girl Scouts) who met once a week in a corner of the exercise yard. The Guides discovered the date of her birthday and using tiny scraps of fabric, they created a Grandmother's Flower Garden quilt as a gift. The quilt survived the war years and remains a treasured possession to this day. It was this same patchwork that was to inspire the making of three other Changi quilts.



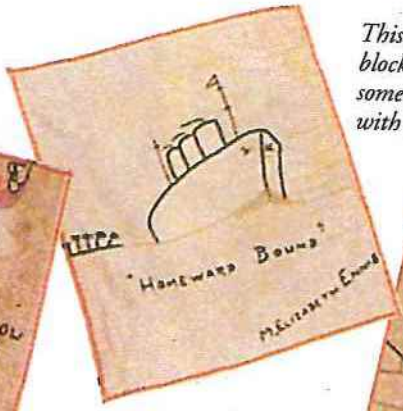
THE JAPANESE QUILT, 51" x 80", made for wounded Japanese soldiers by internees of Changi Prison, 1942. Collection Australian War Memorial, Canberra, New South Wales, Australia.

Ethel Mulvaney was a Canadian internee and the wife of a British soldier. She had been a Red Cross representative in Singapore before the Japanese invasion and now became the camp representative. She was also a very skilled needlewoman. When she saw Elizabeth's quilt, she realized immediately that quiltmaking would be an excellent activity to boost morale and alleviate the endless boredom of camp life. At the same time, the quilts could be used as

M. Webster's crossroads block.



Isobel Jenkins' menu block.



This ship on Elizabeth Ennis' block symbolized her hope of someday sailing home to Scotland with her new husband, Jack.

Life's pleasures remembered in E. Austen-Hofer's block.

Dorothy Mather's map block traced the southward advance of the Japanese soldiers on the Malay Peninsula.

Australian internee Dr. Margaret Smallwood was awarded an Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) in 1946 for her work in caring for women and children prisoners while interned in Changi. She captioned her block "A Room with a View."

"letters" to pass vital information concerning the welfare of the women and children of Changi to the men held in other camps.

Mrs. Mulvaney was an extremely shrewd woman. She decided that one quilt would be made for the Australian soldiers, one for the British, and one for the Japanese. She obtained permission from the Japanese Commandant to provide the quilts to the men, ostensibly as a gift to the wounded. She included the wounded Japanese in her request as a ploy to give the quilts a better chance of reaching their destination.

The quilts were made from embroidered squares edged with Turkey-red stitching. Most of the women had some sewing and embroidery skills, and many had brought a few threads and patterns with them to the camp. Fabric was obtained from unbleached-calico flour, rice, and sugar bags.

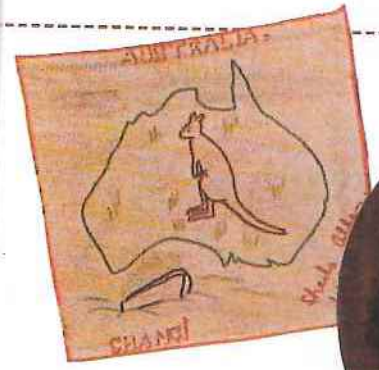
The Japanese quilt was embroidered with pretty floral motifs, but it was the Australian Quilt that included the concealed messages–poignant messages reflecting the thoughts and feelings of the women. A crossroads sign worked by M. Webster included the words "Yesterday, Today, Everyday and Tomorrow." Isobel Jenkins' embroidered menu listed bubu soup, rice, and rice pudding, and carried the message "There is Always a Tomorrow." Two appliqued golliwog figures named "Dungie" and "Dungetta" referred to the children of Mrs. Uniake, a New Zealander, whose son and daughter were interned with her. A square by E. Austen-Hofer depicted a girl in a red dress, her vision of a tree, a loaf of bread, and a bottle of wine accompanied by the words "And Thou Beside Me in the Wilderness." There are several dogs depicted on the quilt and it seems likely that they represented Judy, a small and much-loved terrier who shared the meager food and harsh conditions of camp life.

One of the quiltmakers was an American journalist named Freddy Bloom. Freddy had married her husband, Philip, a doctor with the Royal Army Medical Corps, just nine days before they were both taken prisoner. During her time in camp she was responsible for *The Changi Pow-Wow*, a newspaper that she typed on stolen paper. Along with Dr. Cicely Williams, Freddy was accused of "sinister activities" and spent five months in the torture and interrogation center run by the Kempe-Tai, the Japanese secret police. The two women shared cages with dying men, were starved, forced to crouch in a sitting position, and forbidden to speak. Though she was not tortured herself, Freddy witnessed many atrocities inflicted on other prisoners.

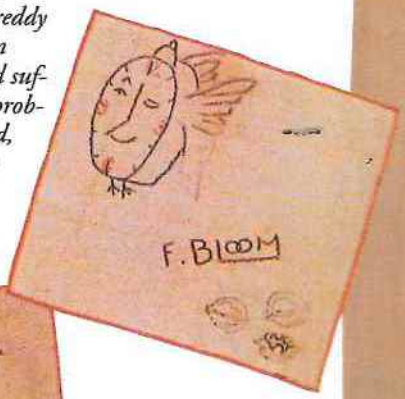
Freddy suffered two heart attacks and collapsed from beri-beri before finally being returned to the camp. Little wonder that she wished her time in Changi would fly–she stitched a winged alarm clock to her quilt square. After the war, Freddy published her memoirs of Changi in a book of letters written to her husband and entitled *Dear Philip*. After having a daughter who was born deaf, she became involved in work for the deaf and edited *TALK*, a magazine for deaf children.

Margaret Smallwood, an Australian doctor, proved that despite everything, it was possible to keep a sense of humor in Changi. She embroidered a picture of her prison cell–its barred window, trundle bed, packing-case table, laundry drying on a line–and called it "A Room with a View"!

Sheila Allan was only 17 years old when she was incarcerated in Changi. She had grown up in Penang and Thailand where her Australian father worked as an engineer. Sheila weighed 140 pounds when she entered Changi, but illness and poor diet reduced her to 84 pounds by the time of her release. Her father died in captivity, just a few short months before liberation. He had always wanted Sheila to go to university in Melbourne, a wish she



Internee Sheila Allan, a schoolgirl of 16, one year before the Japanese invasion. Today, even with her memories of grief and pain, she believes that "the world is still a beautiful place." Sheila's quilt block showed Australia, the "land of her dreams" while in Changi.



American internee Freddy Bloom's winged alarm clock. Newly wed and suffering serious health problems while imprisoned, little wonder that she wished her time in Changi would fly.

The golliwog figures on Mrs. Uniake's block represented her own children.

THE AUSTRALIAN QUILT, 51" x 80", made for wounded Australian soldiers by internees of Changi Prison, 1942. Collection Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

remembered when she embroidered a map of Australia on her quilt square, a kangaroo in its center. She had never yet been to Australia, and today she apologizes to Tasmanians for leaving their island state off her map!

Sheila recorded her experiences of prison life in a diary written in school exercise books, an offense that could have been punished by death had the Japanese caught her. *Diary of a Girl in Changi* was published in 1994 and has helped her come to terms with her memories. Now 75 and living in Sydney, this gentle woman says her experiences taught her to accept, to be more tolerant, to believe in the goodness of people, and to do the best with what she has.

History books often tell the stories of men. Whether convicts, gold miners, or soldiers off to fight the battles of the great wars, their endeavors are copiously recorded. The stories of women, however, are not told as frequently. The women of Changi took part in some of the most dramatic events of the twentieth century. They witnessed horrendous acts that will be forever indelibly etched into their memories. And yet, they endured their captivity with a dignified courage, tenacity, and rare strength of human spirit. The quilts created in Changi remain as a precious legacy, reflecting these times and these women and honoring the part they played in history.

Jenny Manning of Sydney, Australia, is a librarian, horticulturist, needlewoman, and the author of magazine articles and books, including Australia's Quilts: A Directory of Patchwork. *See the Bulletin Board in this issue.*