

LET US NOT FORGET

Written in 1966 by Shelagh Lea (nee Brown), Internee, Sumatra 1942-1945

“Volunteers to dig a grave”. So the word went round. XX has died, her body no longer able to withstand the great demands made upon it, her Spirit ready for her Master. Her last words were “I will pray for you all in Heaven”.

She had had typhus and then there was no food to build up her strength. In the so-called Hospital, there was only enough water to allow one cupful per person per day for washing purposes. This in the tropics in sweltering fever heat and those nursing the sick, themselves in need of rest and care.

And now the call for “Volunteers to dig a grave”. When will the rough coffin be sent or will the body have to lie in the open for 24 hours and quiet vigil be kept, as on a previous occasion? Out of the barbed wire they go, those able at the time and with the strength for digging. Peace? Quietness at any rate. No longer the noisy, dusty, dirty squalor behind the barbed wire. Human bodies, skin and bones, struggling for existence, struggling to help each other – orphaned children in a bewildered small world – sad sights – only silent happier memories of a past existence.

The task is finished. Back they come weary, silent, no water to wash off the dirt, the sweat, but triumph only that a need has been met, a task accomplished. A rough box is brought: will the boards hold?

The small procession forms, how heavy the load, how slow the pace. The camp is silenced, another body laid to rest. The way was steep, the clay heavy, the service simple, the prayers sincere. The hymn “O God our Help in Ages Past” never more appropriate, and favourite scripture more inspiring. One broken body now triumphant – for her Faith was Sure and her Life of Service and Witness Supreme in her Death. Women honoured woman.

There is no one now to care for her Grave, no one is responsible for her last resting place. The end came soon for her, but there are many more like her, both men and women. Is she Chinese, is she English, Eurasian, or Scottish? Is she Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Church of England or a Plymouth Brethren? She had loved Malaya, in her work or in her home. It is only the sad fate of War that caused her to die so soon and in such hardship in an Allied Territory, now Indonesia. She was proud to be British in 1943.

No tombstone or cross now marks the spot of her last resting place. No neat mown grass covers the site. No, for all she did, all she was – only the tropical growth of twenty-three years covers the grave. The birds will be singing and the sunsets will lighten the spot, and the sun give warmth. Will there be buildings erected here in years to come or more battles fought?

She was just one of God's children, but let us not forget...



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