



Speech by

CHRISTINE SMITH

MEMBER FOR BURLEIGH

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MRS F. SYER

Mrs SMITH (Burleigh—ALP) (10.22 a.m.): Queensland lost one of its greatest treasures last month. Florence Syer was an Australian nurse who spent three and a half years in prisoner of war camps in Sumatra trying to care for her fellow prisoners. She was evacuated ahead of the fall of Singapore in 1942 and subsequently her ship, the *Vyner Brook*, was bombed and sunk by the Japanese. She spent over 18 hours in the water before being taken prisoner. Despite completely inadequate medical supplies, hygiene, food or shelter, Sister Florence Trotter, as she was then, and her fellow Australian nurses continued to care for some 300 women and children prisoners interred with them. This enormous task was undertaken despite their own chronic illnesses and the devastating loss of their comrades.

Some 64 Australian nurses were on board the *Vyner Brook* and only 24 made it home alive. The courage and determination it must have taken to survive can only be imagined. Eleven of Sister Trotter's comrades were killed by the bombings or drowned when the ship was sunk. A further 21 were massacred at Bangka Island, where by a miracle Vivien Bullwinkle managed to survive. Eight of the nurses died of malnutrition and illness in the POW camps.

Florence Syer's wartime experiences are a reminder that often Australian women have not only served alongside our troops but have been subject to the same deprivations and suffering that only wartime can bring.

In October 1999 Mrs Syer and some of her comrades were guests of honour at the dedication of the Australian Service Nurses Memorial in Canberra. Mrs Syer passed away aged 86 at Greenslopes Private Hospital in Brisbane, where the Florence Syer Subacute Unit is dedicated in honour of her service to our nation. Mrs Syer was a great lady. I hope that she is remembered and revered as a great Australian of whom we are all very proud.
