



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Joan Bamford Fletcher

First Aid Nursing Yeomanry

Joan was a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. She was also a heroine, leading 2,000 former prisoners of the Japanese to safety through dangerous conditions.

Joan Bamford Fletcher in uniform leaning against the front of a Field Ambulance.
George Metcalf Archival Collection
Canadian War Museum 19800177-004



Life Before the War

Joan was born in Saskatchewan around 1910. Educated in Europe, she was comfortable on her family's ranch, where she trained horses.

When war broke out, the adventurous Joan wanted to serve, but military branches for Canadian women did not yet exist.

She joined the Saskatchewan Auxiliary Territorial Service, a uniformed paramilitary group for women, and later the Canadian Red Cross, training to be a driver.

A Dangerous Assignment

In 1941, Joan went to Britain and joined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY). Some FANY members, including Joan, were attached to the Polish Army, which had escaped Poland after the German invasion, ending up in Scotland.

In April 1945, Joan was sent to Southeast Asia on a humanitarian mission. In October, she was assigned to go to the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) and evacuate the civilian internment camp at Bangkinang.

During the war, the occupying Japanese had imprisoned approximately 130,000 civilians – mainly Dutch colonists. By the time the war ended, the prisoners were suffering from malnutrition and disease. Although the Japanese were no longer in power, the prisoners were still in danger from locals hostile to Dutch colonizers.

The camp at Bangkinang contained around 2,000 prisoners, all of whom had to be moved through mountainous jungle to the coastal city of Padang for safety and medical care. There were no Allied personnel available in the region at the time.

Unfazed, Joan marched into the local headquarters of the recently defeated Japanese 25th Army. She made them give her a fleet of vehicles, as well as an armed escort.

The route from camp to coast was a 450-kilometre trek over mountains as high as 1,525 metres. The roads were terrible. The weather was miserable. And the trucks often broke down.

To make matters worse, the convoy could only transport so many internees at a time. This meant that the same journey had to be made 21 times over six weeks.

Joan was injured on one journey, resulting in a large gash on her head. Despite this, she got all of the internees to safety.

At the end of the operation, the captain of their Japanese escort presented Joan with his katana (Japanese samurai sword) – a significant tribute to her courage.

Life After the War

Joan Bamford Fletcher's actions earned her the Order of the British Empire. After the war, she worked for the British Foreign Office in Soviet-controlled Poland, doing public-relations work for several years.

Her work in Poland ended dramatically. Caught up in a Cold War espionage scandal, she fled Warsaw "one step ahead of the secret police."

She died in British Columbia in 1979, but her sword and war medals are in the collection of the Canadian War Museum.