



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Billy: My Life as a Teenage POW has been compiled from a personal chronicle penned by Billy Young throughout the 1970s, supplemented by hundreds of conversations that we have shared in the course of a close friendship spanning more than two decades. It is the only first-hand published account by an ordinary soldier imprisoned by the Japanese at the infamous Sandakan POW Camp, and one of only three books by a survivor of the Kempeitai's equally notorious Outram Road Gaol. Billy is now the only soldier left alive from Sandakan, and the only Australian prisoner still alive from Outram Road.

As a historian who has invested almost thirty years researching all the wartime events that took place in this book – including those in Malaya, Singapore and Borneo in which Billy took part – I have been privileged to be invited not only to share his memories but in many ways to become an integral part of them.

I didn't realise how special this rapport between us was until January 2004, when we were interviewed together by *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Tony Stephens after each being awarded an OAM in the Australia Day Honours list for our work in relation to the Sandakan POW story.

'Billy Young', Tony wrote, 'talks to Lynette Silver as if she had been in the Sandakan prisoner-of-war camp with him and his mates; as if she knew them like he knew them while they were young. Ms Silver knows more than probably anyone about Sandakan and the 2428 who died in the camp, on the "death march" to Ranau, or at their wretched destination.'

It's true. I do feel as if I know them; that I was there with Billy throughout his captivity as an invisible observer. And Billy recognises this by talking to me as if I were actually there, a mate to share his joys and sorrows, to discuss and mull over the ins and outs of everyday life in a prison camp. That we have a 'shared memory' has become more evident in recent years as he relies on me to provide input into

his recollections by supplying the name of a mate, or a date, or some other small fact that has temporarily slipped his mind.

We have used this unusual and precious partnership to create *Billy: My Life as a Teenage POW*, with me providing historical details gleaned from years of combing archival documents, and Billy giving its unique narrative immense vibrancy and life as he takes us on a very personal journey. Through the eyes of a tearaway teenaged soldier, Billy shares with us his thoughts and experiences, some of which have never before been revealed – secrets that he has kept even from his closest family.

The autobiographical narrative has been compiled by me, using Billy's own words whenever possible but occasionally supplemented with small historical details to give added depth. Interspersed throughout this first-hand account is a 'second voice', which I supply solely as the historical narrator. These sections, easily identifiable as they are in italics, contain information that fall outside the scope of Billy's personal experiences. This historical narrative is secondary, but read in tandem with the autobiographical strand it expands the story in a way not possible otherwise.

Billy Young is a remarkable human being and a national treasure. I am proud and humbled to have him as my friend.

Lynette Silver
October 2015



PROLOGUE

Time. It is not only relative, it can also be deceptive. Fooling us through our adolescence with its change of pace. Urging us on with its promise of great expectations. Dragging its feet at the pull of our impatience.

We daydream, make plans and schemes, on what and how we will spend that time. Then, suddenly, wham! It's gone. Time has done a bunk. The reins lie limp in our hands and we are left looking back at misty shadows – shadows fast disappearing into a distant fogbank of memories.

For me, they are galloping away much too quickly: a mob of brumbies heading for the hills. I need to round them up, put my brand on them before they fade away altogether and are lost in the wilds of beyond, gone forever.

The day I joined the army is such a shadow. A shadow camouflaged in time.

Billy Young
October 2015





CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING

1925 – 1941

It is July 1941, and Australia is at war. Australian troops are fighting the Germans in North Africa and the Middle East and the Japanese, starved of oil, rubber and other commodities, are threatening to make a move into resource-rich South-East Asia. The threat is not taken seriously but, as a precaution, the Australian Government has agreed to strengthen the British garrison in Malaya and Singapore with two brigades of its 8th Division. Although no one perceives any real danger to Australia, there are plenty of patriotic young men willing to volunteer to fight for the King and the Empire. Others, out of work, down on their luck, or perhaps wanting to escape a difficult family situation, also answer the call – the pay is good, three meals a day are guaranteed, and there is every chance of a posting overseas. Keith William Young, just fifteen years old, orphaned, unemployed, broke and on the run from the law, is making his way to an Army recruiting office in Melbourne with Phil, a similarly youthful and wayward acquaintance.

A surly early morning breeze pushed its way through a bank of winter fog, enveloping in whirling, damp, grey cotton-balls of mist anyone foolish enough to be out and about at that ridiculously early hour of the day. Its icy blast had pounced, catching us off guard. Bodies blue and shivering, we hopped, frog like, from one foot to the other in time with our chattering teeth.

These long-ago shadows are still very much alive, sustained over their long haul from teenaged kid to old age by the vigour and fire of youth: the old coal-fired

train engine, billowing shafts of black smoke from its long pipe-stack, whistling a sharp shrill warning of its departure, before huffing and puffing great lungfuls of steam through the throat of Melbourne's Spencer Street Railway Station; people hunched, packed down inside hats and overcoats, pushing and shoving, harassed by time and necessity, far too much concerned with it all to give any heed to two young blokes about to join the army and fight for 'God, King and Country' and, hopefully, get on the right side of a good feed.

Jumping onto the back of the first tram of the day, we managed to almost reach Flinders Street Railway Station before the connie (conductor) came along. Our lack of tuppence for the fare, as both of us were absolutely flat stony broke, forced us to skedaddle, but we continued on foot the short distance to the flag-bedecked Town Hall recruiting centre. It was closed. Could you credit it? And with a great big war going on and the two of us outside looking in, just bursting to enlist? Not only closed, but shut tight, and in almost broad daylight. Temporarily thwarted, but determined to join up, we crouched together in the doorway of the porch, hungry, cold and hungry; impatient, cold and hungry. We waited, and waited.

A good deal later, as the morning defrosted and the sun wore holes in the fog, the Army finally arrived and opened up. 'Not before time', we said to the lieutenant as he unlocked the door. 'Another five minutes and we were off to give our business to the Air Force.' Our words were wasted. Neither he nor his two offsidiers had slightest interest in anything we had to say.

Once inside, they took their sweet time setting up, and were more interested in talking about football than getting down to business. After what seemed an age, one of them dragged himself away, wandered over to the counter where we were waiting and asked, 'Which force are you blokes interested in? AIF or Militia?'

'The one that goes overseas.'

'Right. AIF. Are you old enough?'

'How old is old enough?'

'Nineteen.'

'Great. That's us then.'

'You'll need your parents' consent.'

'Got none.'

'What, both of you?'

'Yep.'

'Then you'll need your next-of-kin's consent. Um, you do have a next-of-kin?'

'Yep, an aunt.'

'An aunt. Well, take these forms and get your aunt's signature. Right?'

'Right. Great. Good-oh', we chorused.

I really was an orphan. I was born in 1925 in Tasmania, at 'Alva', my Nana Young's Federation-style cottage at 7 Tower Road, New Town, a suburb of Hobart. The actual date was 4 November and, if I'd waited another ten minutes, I could have been a Guy Fawkes baby. Sister Cotton, who ran a well-known maternity hospital and also attended private patients, delivered me in Nana's front room.

My dad's family came to Tasmania from England in the 1840s and settled at a little place called Sandfly, near Margate, which is south of Hobart. He was born in 1900. I have a photo of Dad, standing proudly in front of the local school with his bike, about to ride away for the last time. As he pedalled off, the headmistress was heard to say, 'Well, there he goes. He'll either end up prime minister or in prison.'

He was still at school when the Great War began. In 1915, the Anzac story and the landings on Gallipoli must have inspired him, because he decided to join the army. He was way, way too young to enlist – only fifteen – but he was tall and



'Big Bill' with his bike

strapping and big for his age, which is why he was known as Big Bill. He went to the recruiting office, passed the medical and next thing was in the army. Of course, he didn't say a word to anyone at home, because he knew the family would put a stop to it.

The ship was ready to sail for Egypt, ultimate destination Gallipoli, when someone dobbed him in to my grandmother, Susan. Bad move. She controlled the household with an iron hand and her word was law. Not even my grandfather Doug could stand up to her. She demanded that someone in the family drive her immediately to the wharf and stormed aboard the crowded transport. Spotting him easily because of his height, she dragged him off by his ear, big as he was, down the gangway, into the car and home. This action, which made my father a laughing stock and humiliated him to his very core, earned her the nickname of The Admiral.

Nana's tough, rough action had such an effect on my teenaged father that he left home shortly afterwards and took off for Sydney. I have no idea what he did in the big smoke, but the return of the Prodigal Son to Hobart came as a bombshell. In 1925, after ten years away, he turned up on Nana's doorstep with my unmarried and obviously pregnant mother in tow, along with her small son from a previous relationship.

Nana might have wanted her son back, but she certainly didn't want the extra and very unwelcome baggage he had brought with him. My grandmother was a real virago, a despotic tartar, described by my cousin as an 'old bitch'. Not only did she rule the family roost with an iron and unforgiving hand, but she was of a strict Methodist persuasion, which at that time did not tolerate dancing, gambling, drinking, anything slightly racy, sex outside marriage, or Papists.

My poor mother didn't stand a chance. Not only was she pregnant as a result of extramarital relations but even worse she was Irish Catholic. To aggravate the situation, just after Dad arrived home, one of his sisters, my Aunt Gladys, was tragically killed in a car crash. My mum was no substitute for the now sainted, Protestant, decently married Gladys. According to my Aunt Elsie, from the minute my mother set foot in the Young family home, Nana made her life a nightmare. And Aunt Elsie should know. She only lived with Nana because her bigamist husband, my 'Uncle' Edward, had abandoned her and returned to his wife. Nana, who never let poor Elsie forget that she had been duped and dumped, treated her like an unpaid slave.

'Your Mum was a lovely lady', Aunt Elsie once told me, 'but she was stuck out there at Moonah on her own with two small kids, with Nana giving her a hard time. One day she just disappeared.'

I don't remember her at all. All I know is that one day she just upped and went and took Kevin, my half-brother, with her. I was told she was dead. Maybe they didn't want to tell a small boy the truth. My only real link to her at all is her name on my birth certificate, which states that she was formerly Adora Shaw.



Above: The Young Family, from left to right, Cocky (Harold), Nana, Ada, Elsie, Doug.
Below: Susan (Nana), Irene, Elsie, before the war



Billy's mother is a real mystery. There is no trace of the birth, death or marriage of anyone in Australia by the name of Adora Shaw, nor of any marriage to Big Bill Young, or to anyone, at all. The date of 'marriage' recorded on Billy's birth certificate, 4 May 1925, is most probably the date on which the couple began living together as man and wife. As Nana was the informant, it could also be a completely fictitious date, but 4 May seems an odd choice by the morally righteous Nana, since Adora was well and truly pregnant by then. Somewhat unusually, Billy's 'premature' birth was publicised, with a notice in November 1925 that referred to his parents as the very circumspect 'Mr and Mrs W J Young'.

In 1928, Big Bill and Adora, as Bill and Dora, were included in a memorial notice for the saintly Gladys. The 1928 electoral roll listed an Adora Young as home duties and William John Young as a stripper, living in the house owned by the zinc company at Moonah. Stripping was a tough physical job that involved removing the zinc deposits from electrodes after the electrolysis process had been completed. The Hobart paper also reported that in late 1927 a woman named Dora Young had attended at charity fair at New Town, not far from the Young family home in Tower Road. Apart from these instances, there is no trace of anyone named Adora/Dora Shaw or Young in Tasmania after 1928.

Shortly after my mum vanished, my father, whom I adored to the point of hero worship, moved to Sydney, taking three-year-old me with him. As he had a good job at the zinc works, where Uncle Doug was a superintendent, a nice house and a family to help look after me in Hobart, I reckon he must have gone to Sydney to look for Mum. I also reckon he found her. I can remember being taken to see a pile of earth, which I was told was her grave, in a cemetery with big, spear-pointed wrought-iron gates. When I grew up, I tried to find that cemetery and visit my mum's grave, but you know something? Every old cemetery in Sydney has wrought-iron gates and fences, so I'm still looking.

Despite exhaustive searches, no trace of Adora can be found in New South Wales. It is likely that she kept in touch with Big Bill, if only to keep a link with their son. Even if she did, it appears that she changed her name, for there is no record of any death or marriage for her as either Shaw or Young.

Dad's brother, Uncle Harold, who had a good job with a construction firm, lived in Sydney. Harold was Nana's favourite child and was known as Cocky, because he was. Uncle Cocky lived with my Aunt Ilma, her husband Vince and their daughter, my cousin, who had been given the high-falutin' name Wilhelmina.

She never used it and always answered to Billie. This didn't create any confusion in the family as everyone called me by my first name, Keith, or else Keithy.

Nana, of course, did not approve of Vince, who was Roman Catholic. This was bad enough, but tensions became much worse when Aunty Ilma changed sides and became a Papist to marry him, in a Catholic church in Hobart. Everyone knew she gone over to the RCs – there was a notice in the paper about the wedding. So, as far as Nana was concerned, Vince was very definitely *persona non grata*, even though he was well off and lived in Waverley, in the posh eastern suburbs of Sydney. It was probably just as well they didn't live in Hobart, because Nana would have made their lives a misery. Aunty Ilma offered us a home with her when we arrived from Hobart but Dad turned her down. He had nothing against Catholics, because my mother was one, but he was also very left-wing, and in his eyes Uncle Vince was a filthy capitalist.



Billy, aged six, with his father 'Big Bill', c. 1928 in Surry Hills

Uncle Cocky had no such qualms and was happy to live in comfort in a spacious well-appointed house, with hot and cold running water and a proper indoor WC, a room to himself, three home-cooked meals a day and Auntie Ilma to wait on him hand and foot. It was a thousand light years away from our place, a rented room in a terrace house in Albion Street, Surry Hills, a very poor slum area. For a while Uncle Cocky and Dad ran a billiard parlour in nearby Redfern, which was also a front for an SP bookie's operation. As the only kind of betting allowed in those days was at the racecourse, this was all highly illegal, so someone always had to act as a cockatoo and keep an eye out for the cops.

Somehow we managed, with Dad earning a bit here and a bit there and the local corner store allowing him to put goods on tick. Once, when I was sent off to chalk up a tin of condensed milk, I punched a hole in it and hid behind the bedroom door while I scoffed down as much as I could before I was caught.

Work was hard to find and people living a hand-to-mouth existence took whatever jobs were available, always on the lookout for some way to make an extra bob. To help make ends meet, Dad worked as a street photographer for a while. He set up his tripod in nearby Elizabeth Street, outside the Sydney Hotel, which was a popular watering hole for well-heeled drinkers. On the ground beside him was his gear, which included a bucket full of hypo and another with water, to process the photographic plates. One day as he was touting for business a well-dressed bloke, who was a bit under the weather, came out of the pub and tripped, knocking over the water bucket. 'Hey', said Dad. 'You've just spilt all me chemicals – that cost me thirty bob.' To compensate for this 'loss', the bloke, who was most apologetic, handed over two one-pound notes.

After that my father got a job as an ironworker in a nearby foundry. He hadn't been doing it for very long when he suddenly disappeared. He was gone for a few months. With no mother to care for me, I was sent to a Catholic Children's Home on the western outskirts of Sydney.

Billy was told that his father's prolonged absences, for there was more than one, were due to his working away from Sydney, supposedly as a shearer in outback New South Wales and as a cane cutter in Queensland. However Big Bill, an unskilled labourer, was not away shearing sheep or cane cutting, both skilled occupations for which he had no training. He was 'doing time'. Like many others, William Young, now aged 30, had run afoul of the law in his efforts to provide for himself and Billy during a world-wide depression that saw thousands of jobless roaming the streets and children malnourished, even dying, from lack of food.

In April 1931 he appeared in Redfern Court, arrested for forging and uttering a cheque in the name of Mr W B Carey, a prosperous tea broker whose office was in Bridge

Street, Sydney. It was a serious charge. The prosecution alleged that, after obtaining a cheque book in Carey's name, Big Bill had tried to cash a cheque for 100 pounds at the Redfern branch of the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney. When challenged by the suspicious bank manager, a scuffle broke out and Big Bill made good his escape.

However, there was no hiding from the long arm of the law. Apprehended and arrested, he was charged on 20 April. On 18 May, he was found guilty by Judge Edwards of uttering (the forgery having been carried out by another) and remanded for sentencing until the following day.

In an attempt to mitigate what would certainly be a custodial sentence, Big Bill told the court that his wife was dead and he had a small son, aged five, to care for. 'I haven't got twopence to my name', he pleaded. 'I do not go around with any gang.'

Judge Curlewis, who presided over the sentencing hearing, took into consideration the plea that Big Bill was not part of one of the city's gangs, which had been preying on small shopkeepers, especially women, by passing forged cheques. However, this and the fact that he was a single parent with a small dependent son were not enough to keep him out of gaol. He was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

With Big Bill cooling his heels at His Majesty's pleasure, provision had to be made for Billy, lest 'the welfare' place him in a state institution. It appears that at this point Auntie Ilma and Uncle Vince stepped in, and arranged for him to live in the children's home, run by an order of Catholic nuns, where there was plenty of fresh air, open space and strict discipline. Billy, who was not yet six and had just started school, hated it.

The orphanage was built on stilts, with the basement area screened with wooden lattice, like the tropical houses you see in Queensland. When it was time for lunch, we'd sit against the lattice on stools, waiting for the big boys to arrive with a baby bath filled with slices of bread and treacle. They were called dodgers, and each kid was allowed two slices. Try and cadge another piece and you'd get a clout.

Fortunately, I was rescued from my misery one day when a lady, a complete and utter stranger, turned up with a letter from my father, authorising the nuns to hand me over. While she was no spring chicken, she looked kind enough and had a nice voice, but I was not too sure about the dead fox draped around her neck, with its glassy bright eyes staring at me. I was getting ready to run when she told me my dad had asked her to take me home with her. The nuns didn't seem to have any problem with this and since I couldn't wait to get out of the place, I didn't either.

It was a bit of a walk up a steep hill to the railway station, where she asked if I'd like a drink while we waited for the train. She had a cup of tea, but I had