

BROWN William Sydney

Name: William Sydney Brown

Born: 19 December 1916

Rank: Storeman

Service Number: 5953948

Regiment/Unit: 5th Battalion
Beds & Herts, A Company

Died: Not applicable



Wartime experience:

Billy, as he is known, was called up in April 1940 in Norwich, Norfolk. He moved around the country to several camps, even changing to the 5th Battalion, before he eventually reported to Captain Corner and was given a job as a Technical store man attached to Motor Transport in charge of petrol pumps. He then went to Merrivale Park, Atherstone, Warwickshire, where the petrol pumps were at the junction with railway station. There were three tanks, holding 1,800 gallons of petrol – the down side was, he was always on call, but the upside was he had no parades. He was then moved to Whittington Barracks, Lichfield, Staffordshire then on October 1941 he went on embarkation leave to Norwich. Following which he went to Birkenhead to go overseas. On 29 October 1941 Billy, embarked on SS Reini Pacifico in convoy to Halifax, Nova Scotia. On 9 November he transferred to USS West Point and sailed for Cape Town, South Africa via East Coast USA & Trinidad. 6 December to 13 December he went on to Bombay where they spent three weeks acclimatising and training.

19 January 1942, Billy set sail again on the USS West Point and on 29 January 1942 they arrived in Singapore. On 30 January he went to Birdwood Camp.MT and took up position in the area between the Naval Base and Seletar Airfield. Billy retreated to Hill 105 via the, by now, deserted Seletar Airfield. He was involved in the McRichie Reservoir incidents - he was with a mate called Billings when Japanese planes came over, Billy chose to take cover in a ditch whereas Billings took cover with some Chinese in a 'go-down' (warehouse), which received a direct hit.

Another time when Billy was in a ditch, with a Scot, Pt Sutherland, they were both climbing out, when there was a burst of machine gun fire passed between them. Again on another occasion, he was with a driver, in the second of two lorries, when the first lorry, with Rackley and Phillips in, was hit by mortar fire. Rackley was killed and Phillips who was injured, lost a leg. Billy was given an anti-tank gun with loader to cover a bridge – he had never used one before and, luckily, the only tank he was an Allied one.



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Singapore fell on 15 February 1942 and Billy was taken prisoner at Hill 105, near McRichie reservoir. He was marched to Changi Barracks where they were put up in tents in the old prison beside Changi. He had to clear some of the plantation houses for Japanese occupation. All the books and furniture had to be destroyed. There was a roster here where prisoners went with a Japanese soldier on a day job into Singapore. Billy went with friendly Japanese lorry driver who had a POW assisting as labourer for the day going to local villages - he was trying to learn English.

Billy was moved to Bukit Timah where he worked on the Japanese Shrine steps with Australian POWs. He was then moved by train to Ban Pong then on to Kanchanaburi where he and his comrades were marched across the river while it was in flood - Billy couldn't swim! They weren't there long, before they were marched to Chungkai. There was no transport. The first job was to clear the crag; Billy was put to work on the 'hammer and tap' (boring holes for explosives) and putting ballast under sleepers. He was moved to Wampo (Wang Po) to work on the double viaduct, where he joined the tree felling party. Japanese marked the trees which had to be felled in one day, once felled they were dragged off site by elephants. From there Billy was moved to Rintin, near the waterfall. 17 October 1943 the railway was finished and he was moved back to Singapore by railway.

Early January 1944 Billy boarded the Hell ship Osaka Maru for Japan, with the Hofoko Maru in convoy. They anchored off Borneo for one night; stopped in Manila for three days taking on coal for boilers, then ran into a hurricane which broke the back of the Osaka Maru. She grounded on a small island and the next day the crew and POWs were picked up by two Japanese destroyers and the voyage continued and they landed in Moji on 23 August 1944. Billy was put on a train to Tamano, Osaka where he worked on a lathe in an engineering factory.

On 15 August 1945 the Japanese surrendered and the war was over. The Allies dropped supplies into camp by parachute. On one occasion, a POW was hit in the chest by a case of fruit that broke loose. His name was Aldous and worked at Fieldings on Prince of Wales Road, Norwich, before the war. A Japanese doctor stitched his chest up from throat to stomach. The rice supplies from camp also helped to feed starving Japanese women and children living near the camp.

Billy's journey home - train to Wakayama; USHS Sanctuary to Okinawa; There was a storm in Manila and he was transferred to HMS Glory. Stopped off in Hawaii, disembarked in Victoria BC, where they stopped for three weeks. Then by train from Vancouver to Jasper, onto Ottawa to New York then aboard the Queen Mary to Southampton.

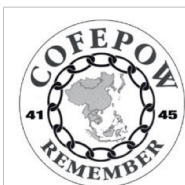
Civilian life after return:

Billy returned home to his wife, Alice, and son, Michael. He resumed his pre-war job working for Harmers Clothing Manufacturers on Havers Road, Norwich. He has been in the same flat all of his life and, since the death of Alice, lives quietly with his books and music. He has probably read almost every book connected with the fall of Singapore and is keenly interested in collecting Toby Jugs and UK first day cover stamps. He has one son; two granddaughters; two great grandchildren and three great, great grandchildren.



Above: Billy on his 100th birthday with his telegram from the Queen

Billy has read and personally approved the above.



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