

NICHOLLS William Coates

Name: William Coates Nicholls

Born: 29 April 1919

Rank: Able Seaman

Service Number: D/DX/167763

Unit/Regiment: HMS Yin Ping,
Royal Navy

Died: 18 January 2008



Pre-War:

William, known as Bill, was born on 29 April, 1919. He had a sister, Mary who was born on 1 January 1912, so she was thrilled to have a baby brother to look after. The family lived in a terraced house in Bridgwater, Somerset. His father, who served in World War 1, suffered from the effects of wartime gas raids but managed to go back to his work as a hairdresser in a small shop in Bridgwater. Bill was a good 'old fashioned' boy, always up to mischief and getting into trouble. The family went to a local church and Bill attended the church school, opposite the church. He left school at the age of 14 and went to work in his father's business as an apprentice hairdresser. At that time working hours were 8 a.m. to 8p.m. Monday to Friday and 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Saturdays. In those days many men went to the hairdressers for their daily cut-throat shave, so he became an expert at this as well as hairdressing.

Wartime experience:

Bill joined the Royal Navy on 25 October 1939 at Butlin's Holiday Camp, Skegness, on HMS Royal Arthur, then on 30 November 1939 was drafted to HMS Drake in Plymouth, then HMS Sultan II in Singapore. He left Plymouth by train to Portsmouth, to Cherbourg and on to Marseilles, joined the cruise liner Andes and arrived in Singapore on 1 May 1940. There he served on the HMS Dragonfly, a Yangtze river gunboat, until 27 April 1941 before returning to barracks. After war broke out against Japan, Bill was moved to Pilot House and on to a water boat, waiting for soldiers who were cut off. Then he moved to R.A.F. Seletar and after to an Admiralty tug, from there to a petrol station and then back to another tug called 'Yung Ping'. Bill left Singapore on 13 February 1942 for Australia but, the ship was sunk in the Banka Strait two days later.



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After 16 hours of clinging to a lifeboat, he was picked up by an RAF rescue launch and was captured in the Banka straights on 16 February 1942, becoming a POW in Banka. A week later, he was transported to Singapore where he was imprisoned on a coaster named MV Rompin at the Singapore Naval Base until 1944. During imprisonment he served on work parties around the base and also made two trips to Sumatra to bring timber. In July 1944, Bill was moved to Changi Gaol, where he was employed as hairdresser to the warrant officers. Occasionally, he was sent to work on the aerodrome. As a POW, he earned about \$6 a month.

Civilian life after return:

After liberation, Bill had his first taste of normal food – eggs and bacon. He returned on the hospital ship Monaway to Liverpool, where he was greeted by his sister, aunts, uncles, and the town dignitaries. He was eventually discharged from the Navy after six months and returned to his father's shop to continue running a successful hairdressing business until he retired in 1984.

Bill suffered from melanoma, about seven outbreaks in all. Although suffering from a melanoma strangling his pancreas, he died from the hospital bug difficile.

Sadly, Bill passed away on 18 January 2008.



'We were so luck he made it home and lived a happy and industrious life as a hairdresser in Bridgwater until he retired in 1984, moved to Burnham-on-sea and with Mum enjoyed many years on the bowling green.

I was an only child, they wanted more but it never happened, another thing blamed on being a FEPOW. I was lucky to have two sons and I now have two grandsons and two granddaughters, a boy and girl to each family. How lucky we all are that, against the odds, Dad made it'.

Keith Nicholls (son)

The above information and wording has been provided by Keith Nicholls (son)



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