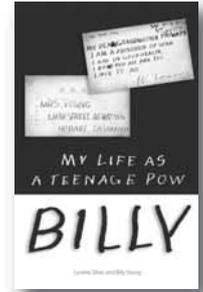


## BOOK REVIEW

# *Billy: my life as a teenage POW*

by Lynette Silver and Billy Young

*Sally Milner Publishing: Binda NSW; 2016; 340 pp.; ISBN-9781863514958; Ursula Davidson Library call number 588 SILV 2016; RRP \$29.99 (paperback)*



*Billy* is a remarkable account of the life of Private Billy Young, a World War II Australian soldier who fought in the Battle for Malaya and Singapore, and then became a prisoner of the Japanese in the Sandakan prisoner-of-war (POW) camp in Borneo, and later in Outram Road Gaol in Singapore.

Billy Young had had a disadvantaged start in life and his father had been killed fighting in the Spanish Civil War. When he enlisted in July 1941, Billy claimed to be exactly four years older than he really was – when he became a POW, he was only 15! He is now ‘only just’ into his nineties. This book is based on his notes, drawings, poems and recollections.

Lynette Silver, a member of the Institute, is one of Australia’s most respected authors and has for many years been uncovering priceless information about the experiences of Australian prisoners of the Japanese, and other topics. *Inter alia*, she has been able to identify people who fraudulently claimed benefits for having been prisoners of the Japanese.

The experiences detailed in this book are tragic, unfair and unforgivable. The book is harrowing enough to read, but to have endured and survived such treatment is unimaginable. There are moving poems and poignant drawings by Billy Young, evocative photos, and an impressive bibliography. Lynette Silver has placed Billy’s notes and recollections into their wider contexts – almost as if she had been with him in captivity. This provides helpful connectivity with the settings and events. It demonstrates how a skilled researcher and genealogist can produce a coherent and compelling story of an ‘ordinary’ Australian family using public records, recollections and some family documents.

Billy Young is the last Sandakan survivor and the last Australian survivor from Outram Road Gaol run by the sadistic and inhuman Kempeitai. He is surely a genuine Australian national treasure. Ironically, he survived Sandakan because an escape attempt saw him confined to Outram Road Gaol before the Japanese started to systematically murder their captives pursuant to an order made in August 1944. The Sandakan Death Marches were part of that process. A list of Australian dead at Sandakan and Australian inmates of Outram Road gaol takes 15 pages. The Australian death toll from Sandakan, including the three death marches, was 1787 men. Of 64 Australian inmates of Outram Road, six died in captivity and 10 were executed – 25 per cent!

*Billy* recounts versions of the factors that led to the defeat in Malaya and surrender at Singapore. One

despairs that so many young soldiers and local civilians were placed in such positions by the British and Australian governments. Our ground forces were clearly denied the local leadership, defensive preparations, air cover and naval support essential if the defence of Malaya and Singapore were to have any chance of success.

*Billy* makes clear that, in spite of the contemptuous way the Imperial Japanese Army treated prisoners who had surrendered, they tried to cover up the cowardly and hideous crimes they had committed because they feared accountability. Very few carried out the ‘hari kari’ they boastfully foreshadowed.

Also noted is the failure of some Australian officers to look after their men, and protect them from their captors’ brutality. Unusually, it names several and has photos of others. I wonder if the decision by the General Officer Commanding 8<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, Major General Gordon Bennett, to escape capture was a factor in the later behaviour of some Australian officers.

Changi Gaol was a relatively safe and healthy place compared to other places prisoners were sent; such as the Burma-Thailand Railway, Borneo and Japan itself. Billy Young and M. P. Brown were the only two Australian Outram Road inmates denied ‘relief’ in Changi.

The atrocities committed against the Chinese population are outlined. The Sook Ching massacre in Singapore receives little attention, but is thought to have seen the murders of over 10,000 local Chinese. Sadly, many of these murders followed the Australian commando raid on Singapore harbour in September 1943, and the incorrect Japanese assumption that damage to its shipping was caused by local Chinese. These, and Japanese atrocities elsewhere, especially in China itself, need to be understood in any appreciation of China’s current attitudes around the East China Sea.

The sudden ending of the Pacific War by the two atomic bombs in August 1945 saved the lives of Allied prisoners and no doubt many local civilians. This is often overlooked in the regular attempts to question the rationale for the use of atomic weapons.

This book could be the World War II equivalent of A. B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* (Penguin Books: Ringwood, VIC, 1981), which covers Facey’s Great War service and subsequent civilian life and has been prescribed reading in Australian schools. I suggest Billy Young’s post-war life warrants more telling. Perhaps a sequel could be written – ultimately merged with this volume.

**Ken Broadhead**