

## Old but not weary, Billy Young recounts his time as a prisoner of war

By [Anne Barker](#)

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Billy Young is the only surviving Australian soldier who spent time at Sandakan.

*(Supplied: Lynette Silver)*

It remains the single-worst atrocity against Australians at war. Yet many Australians have probably never heard of Sandakan. So few men returned from the Japanese prisoner of war camp on the island of Borneo after World War II it has become a neglected chapter in Australia's wartime history.

In fact 2,000 Australians spent time as POWs at Sandakan. And of the nearly 1,800 still captive there at the end of the war, only six men survived.

All of which makes Sydney man Billy Young rare indeed. He spent three years as a POW under the Japanese.

He is the only surviving rank and file Australian soldier who spent time at Sandakan. And he is the only POW still alive who was imprisoned at Outram Rd Jail in Singapore.

Now aged 90, he has written a book about his inspiring story. *Billy: My Life as a Teenage POW*, co-written

with historian Lynette Silver, will be launched on Tuesday by New South Wales Governor David Hurley.

Mr Young would never have gone to war if his mother had not abandoned him as a baby.

Adora Shaw walked out on Billy and his father William in Hobart in about 1927 and returned to Sydney with another son Kevin, from an earlier relationship.

Billy never saw her again. One of his earliest memories is of his father taking him to Sydney to search for her, and later showing him her grave. She had apparently died of tuberculosis.

A decade later his father also died. He had joined the Australian Communist Party and gone to Spain to fight in the civil war, but was caught and shot by forces loyal to dictator General Franco.

"When he was gone, I was like a wild animal," Mr Young says from his home near Hurstville.

**"I was a rebel. I wanted my dad. He was the only person of authority I could listen to."**

The young Billy was sent to a boys' home. But school wasn't for him. At 15, a fellow student told him he wanted to enlist in the army. It was 1941. Australian troops were fighting overseas. Billy decided to join him.

"The fella said to us 'what mob do you want to join?' And we said the one that goes overseas. He said 'that's the AIF', and I said 'that's us'. He said 'how old are you?' And we said 'how old have you gotta be?' He said 19. We said 'well, we're 19'."

With no parents to give consent, the boys took the enlistment forms and signed each other's paper. At 15 they were soldiers.



Billy decided to join the army at the age of 15. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)



William "Big Billy" Young and son Billy, aged six, in Sydney. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)

## 'Death had slippers'

Hoping for a boys' own adventure, they joined the 100,000 allied troops in Singapore. Mr Young says initially there was no fear of the Japanese.

"Intelligence officers used to say to us: 'Those Japanese — they're nothing. They're blind. They all wear glasses, they're short-sighted'," he says.

"But when they came down it was no laughing matter. They knew what they were doing."

Soon after Billy's 16th birthday the allied forces crumbled under the Japanese. Billy was suddenly a prisoner of war at Changi.

Then, with hundreds more soldiers he was shipped to Borneo to build a Japanese airstrip at Sandakan in the Malaysian jungle. It was stinking hot, humid and overrun by mosquitos. But it was nothing against the brutal treatment of the Japanese.

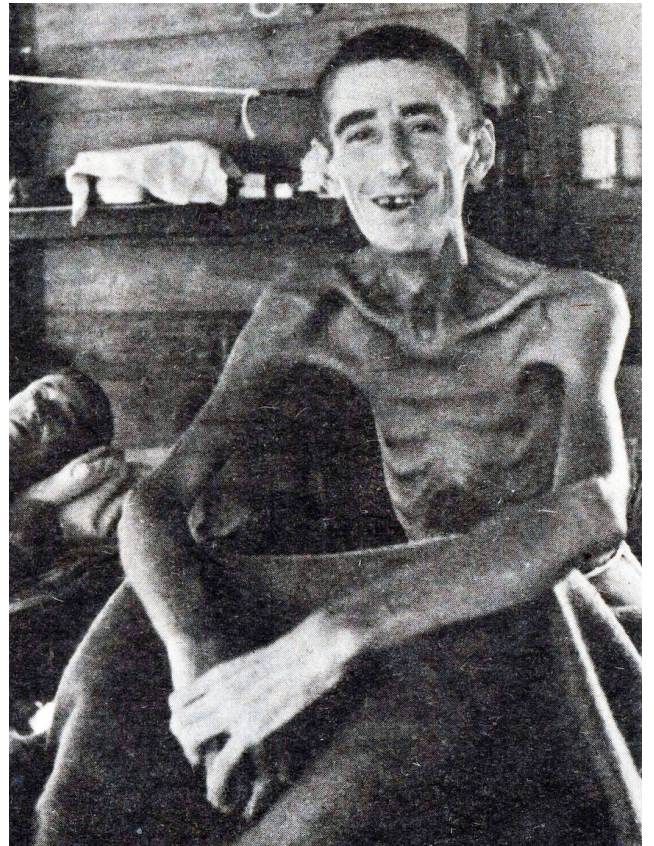
The lack of food and water, torture and beatings were all common.

"Sandakan was tremendously brutal towards the end of the war. Food was cut back to below starvation rations," co-author Ms Silver says.

"And as Japan was losing the war, the punishment handed out was far more brutal than in the beginning. People were placed in a cage for 40 days and 40 nights. And some of them actually died in the cage."

Mr Young survived the Japanese brutality. But he watched other POWs suffer from starvation and the worst violence.

One such victim was a young Aboriginal soldier Jimmy Darlington, who had dared to strike a Japanese soldier for washing his clothes in the prisoners' cooking pot. He was bound and tied to sharp stakes of wood and left to suffer.



A photograph of fellow Changi prisoner Jack "Becky" Sharpe. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)



A depiction of young Aboriginal soldier Jimmy Darlington's punishment. (*Supplied: Lynette Silver*)

"One of the Japs grabbed a bucket of water," Mr Young says.

"Another was grabbing ropes and he put it in the water, and knelt him on the platform and tied him down with ropes, or wet ropes.

"The sun started to shine and dried the ropes. And the ropes tightened up, right up, and cut right into his wrists and his legs."

Only after Mr Young and his mates created a diversion to distract the Japanese could another Australian soldier — an ambulance officer — move in to cut the ropes. Without it, Mr Young says Darlington would have died.

But far worse was in store for Mr Young. After a failed escape he was tried and sent to the hellhole that was Outram Road jail back in Singapore. He spent six months in solitary confinement — forced to sit cross legged for hours at a time.

Food rations were so pitiful prisoners, including Mr Young, became skeletal. He sat by while one of his fellow prisoners, a Dutch man, died of Beri-Beri in his arms.

"I put his head on my lap. I chatted to him and I pushed his chest and felt it. And you could feel it going up and down as he was panting for breath," Mr Young says.

"But death must have had slippers because he died and I didn't know. So I waited.

"I put him down and I didn't tell the guard, and I waited till his box of rice came and I put Peter's bowl by him. And I got mine, I ate mine, and then I ate Peter's. And that's the only banquet we ever had between us you know."

The bombing of Hiroshima signalled freedom for Mr Young.

## **The price of freedom**

Returning to Sydney, he couldn't wait to reunite with his old mates from Sandakan.

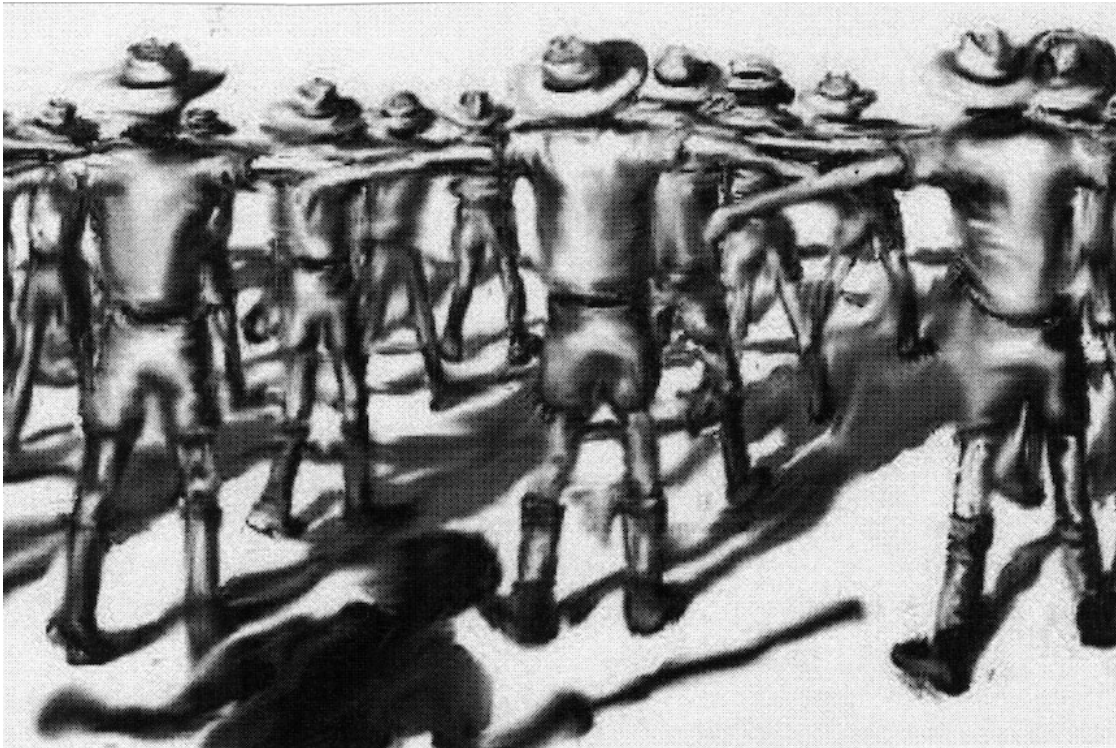
But he couldn't find them.

"I waited and waited and waited. It took me ages to find out," he says.

Only six men of the nearly 1,800 Australians in Sandakan at the end of the war survived.



Prisoners line up for lunchtime rice. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)



Billy's depiction of "flying practice", a group punishment exercise where prisoners would stand for hours in the heat. *(Supplied: Lynette Silver)*

Many had died in the so-called Death Marches, when the Japanese forced them to walk as near-skeletons, 250 kilometres across Borneo.

Hundreds more starved to death. Still others were executed even after the war ended.

"The death rate at Sandakan for the Australians, 1,787 died, was 99.75 per cent," Ms Silver says.

Some of Mr Young's mates from Outram Rd also didn't last long.

"One of my dear friends got home in Tasmania and not home long and he went into his mum and dad's orchard and blew his brains out with a rifle," he sobs.

Mr Young was only 19 when he returned to Sydney. He had his own demons to confront.

"We had no-one who understood the trauma. Not then. Even now ... at 91 almost, there are still stories I cannot tell. I bawl like a little baby," he says.



The Outram Rd Jail in Singapore. *(Supplied: Lynette Silver)*

For years his own family knew nothing about his time as a war prisoner.

"When I was about nine years old I did ask Dad a question and I just got such a strong negative reaction from him that I just knew you just don't talk, we didn't talk about it, so I never raised the subject again," Mr Young's daughter Susan says.

But 70 years on, the wounds have finally healed.

Mr Young today is an avid painter. His home is filled with paintings of his time at Sandakan and Outram Rd Jail.

His daughter believes it is his positivity that ensured her father's survival into old age.

"He very rarely has a down moment. He is just so positive, and I think that his positivity, his positive attitude has gotten him this far," she says.

Mr Young's paintings — and now the book he has written with Ms Silver — will remain a lasting record of the mates he lost at Sandakan.

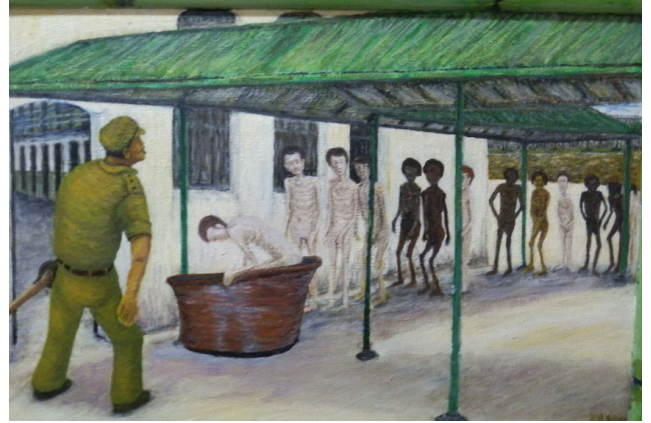
"For Billy and me they are frozen in time," she says.

"We know them as they were — as 18-year-old kids, 22-year-old men. And that's probably the great thing about the ode that we say — they shall grow not old as we that are left grow old. Age won't weary them and it hasn't.

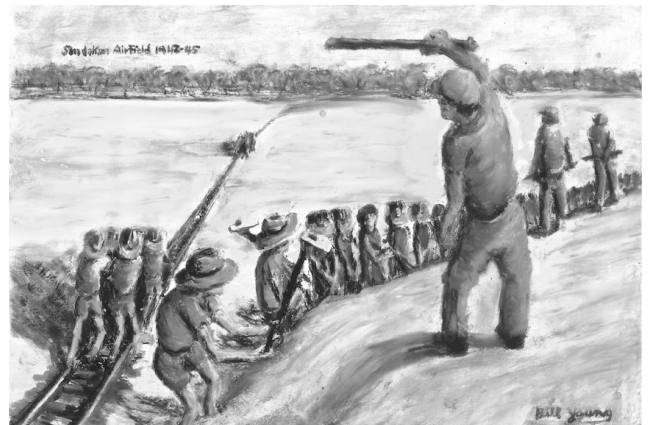
"For the two of us they are still the people that left Australia as young people, young men with hope for the empire and their country. Taking on the Japanese, and who never came home."

Mr Young too is now old, but not weary. He has a large family and still paints.

But there is one mystery he has never solved.



Another of the many artworks hanging in Billy's home, a memory of his former life. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)



Working on the Sandakan airfield is now a distant memory. (Supplied: Lynette Silver)

When he returned from the war as a young man he tried to find his mother's grave. He remembered when his father first took him it was near a wrought iron gate. He assumed it would be easy to find again.

He searched and searched for his mother Adora Shaw, the name on his birth certificate. But he has never found a trace of her.