

Bill Downie

Bill Downie was always talked about with love and admiration by both Nana and Mum. He was Nana's youngest brother and just eight years older than Mum. He was a hero within the family and definitely a presence at the house in Mooroopna. He was killed as a POW in September 1943. He was always spoken about in loving and reverential terms and his death was remained a raw and painful memory for Nana and Mum all their lives. Bill had a lot of things going for him, tall, good looking, a champion footballer. The photograph of him in army uniform supports this. Most of the other photos I have of Bill as an adult he is a thin man rather gaunt at times.

Bill's marriage certificate states his birthplace as Denilquin, his army records also have his birthplace as Denilquin. The date given is 3rd December 1909, his birth was also registered in Victoria in 1909, Ref. 5836R, at Raywood, father not named, mother Elizabeth Webster. The birth is also registered as William Sheppard Webster with the same details. His mother Elizabeth was no longer living with Mick Downie and lived with William Sheppard. Given Bill's registered name I have assumed his father was William Sheppard. On his marriage certificate, in 1934, Bill gives his father's name as William Downie which is an each way bet.



Bill Downie (1909 - 1943)



Bill lived with his mother in Neilborough and he is to be found in two Neilborough Primary School photographs of the period. One (at left) from about 1915 when he would have been in his first year. His brother Les is also in this picture. The other is identified as a 1920 photo when he would have been about 11. Bill must have left school soon after as he is not in a 1922 photo of the school.

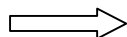


In 1929 Bill was recruited to play football with Footscray, at the time he was playing with Eaglehawk. He could have been living at home until this time. Another photo shows him in a group at Neilborough, this would have been taken about 1939.

At the time of his marriage in 1934 he was a plumber but when he joined the army he gave his occupation as motor driver mechanic.



Family and friends at Neilborough, From back unknown, Kevin Judd, Harold Judd, Kathleen Judd, Carrie Judd, front row, unknown, Bill Downie.



Bill's Football Career

In 1929 Bill was cleared from the Eaglehawk Football Club to play with Footscray in the then VFL, he played nine games in 1929 before becoming a regular member of the team in 1930, 31 and 32 when he played almost all matches. In 1933 he transferred to St Kilda and played 15 matches that year with them. Bill is described as a six foot 12^{1/2} stone, solidly built, strong marking ruckman. Bill appears on four footy cards that I have found on the net. The first is from his debut year of 1929.



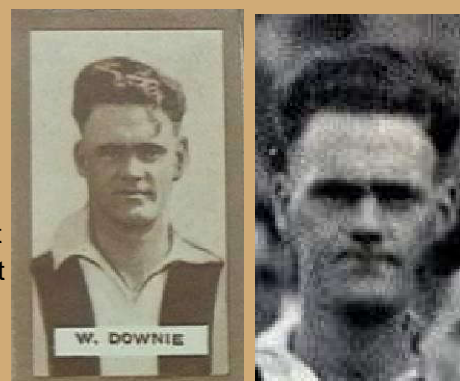
1932 cards of bill Downie, left Clarke-Ellis Confectionary, right Hoadley's



Bill Downie's Footy Card 1929

In 1932 there were two in different company's sets. The same photo appears to have been used. I found a photograph of the Footscray team of Bill's era in the State Library of Victoria (SLV) collection, I think the photograph I have extracted could be Bill.

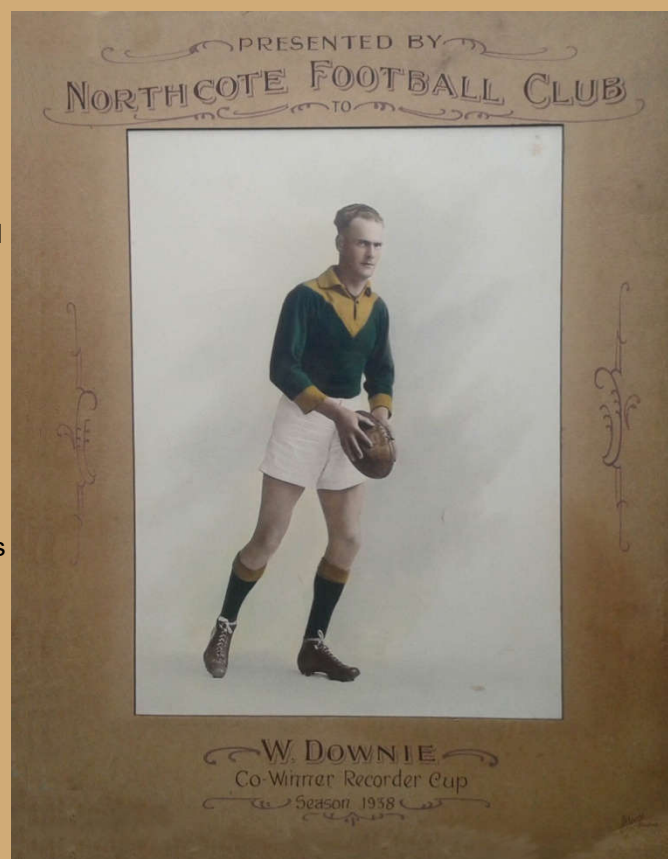
There are two photos that I have found when he was a StKilda. One is a footy card of 1934 and the other photo is from the St Kilda Football Club Official website. He looks very thin in the club photo, more robust on the card.. There is no record of Bill playing a game in the firsts at St Kilda in 1934, most histories have him playing with Deniliquin in that year. This was during the depression and football would have been important in providing some money for him. His transfer to StKilda may have been prompted by money. He played 15 games at St Kilda in 1933 but then moved on.



He was not playing in Melbourne for two years; I presume he played with Deniliquin for that time. His son Barry was born in Deniliquin in 1935. In 1936 he commences playing with Northcote Football Club in the VFA. Northcote won the premiership that year and Bill Downie kicked two goals in the Grand Final. In 1938 Bill was a joint winner of the Recorder Cup, the Best and Fairest in the VFA, with Arthur Cutting of Williamstown.

The framed photograph (at right) presented to Bill by the Northcote Football Club on Bill winning the Recorder Cup hung on the wall of the dining room of Nana's house in Mooroopna. It was passed on to Bill's son Barry when Nana passed away. It has been restored and is now with Barry's family.

Bill life and football career is documented in the book *Fallen - the ultimate heroes: footballers who never returned from war* by Jim Main & David Allen. The authors used the photo taken from the Northcote team photograph that I think is wrongly identified.

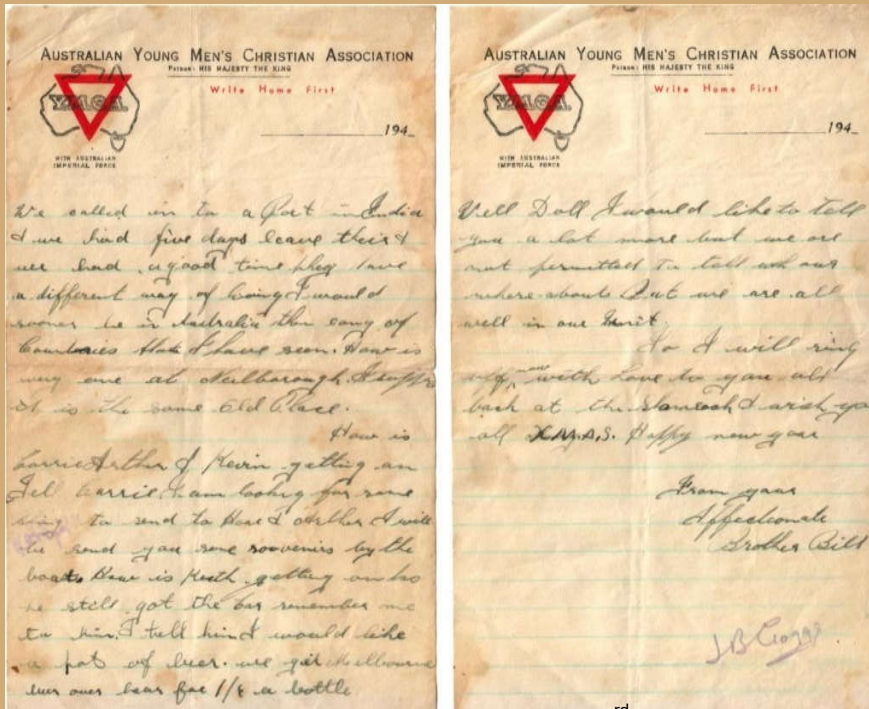


The Army

Bill joined the army the 20th September 1940, his papers do record he had served in the Militia A.A.S.C. (Australian Army Service Corps) and was a sergeant. The militia was an alternative name for the part time and volunteer Citizens' Military Force or CMF. It seems that service was recognised as within a week he was posted the Australian Mobile School of Mechanics and within a month (26/10/1940) had embarked on the troopship A306 bound for Kantara in Egypt. A letter that he wrote is included here together with a transcription for those who do not understand the old style writing. I have left his spelling and as he has written it. The Christmas envelope is dated 2 Dec 1940 so would have been written soon after he got to the Middle East. Amongst Nana's photos are some pictures of the Church of Gethsemany in Jerusalem, some Arab women and the WWI war cemetery at Gaza.



Bill Downie's Army records photograph.



He was in the Middle East until April 1942, on 3rd April 1942 he disembarked at Batavia (Djarkarta), on the 28th April 1942 he was posted as missing in Java. We now know he was captured by the Japanese and became a POW and worked on the Burma rail where he died on September 9th 1943. In his army records his cause of death is given as tropical ulcers. In the football biographies it is felt that this was the reason given to the family to avoid distress. One biography goes as far as to state "Downie was understood to have been executed by the Japanese for insubordination to an officer". In another he is reputed to have been shot by a Japanese guard. Certainly in our family the feeling was that he was killed because he was giving cheek to the Japanese guards. Nana, Kevin, Arthur and Carrie all had an abiding hatred of anything Japanese, rooted in this sad part of the family's story.

Bill Downie is buried at the Thanbyuzayat War Cemetery, Myanmar (Burma) - just over the hills from Thailand. This cemetery, which can only be reached by train, contains the graves of 3149 Commonwealth and 621 Dutch dead.

We called in to a Port in India & we had five days leave their (sic) & we had a good time they have a different way of living I would as sooner be in Australia than any of Countries that I have seen. How is everyone at Neilborough. I suppose it is the same old place.

How is Carrie Arthur and Kevin getting on Tell Carrie I am looking for some thing to send to Her & Arthur I will send you some souvenirs by the boat. How is Keith getting on has he still got the Car remember me to him. & tell him I would like a pot of beer we get Melbourne beer over hear for 1/6 a bottle

Well Doll I would like to tell you a lot more but we are not permitted to tell wh our whereabouts But we are all well in our unit.

So I will ring off now with Love to you and all back at the Shamrock & wish all merry XMAS. Happy new year

From your
Affectionate
Brother Bill