

# Sergeant William George Bridgman

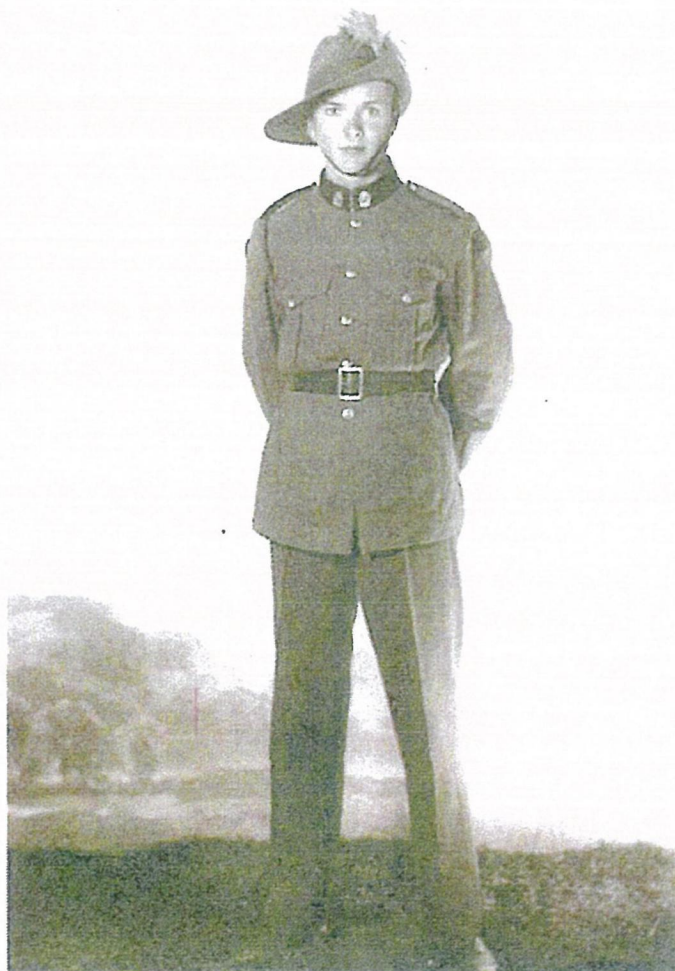
July 19<sup>th</sup> 1940 – May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1945

9<sup>th</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Regiment

SN: S7277

RAAF

SN: 39850



2021 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize

Central Yorke School

Nicholas Heinrich

*"In the blazing heat of the Pilbara, some 36km south of Marble Bar in WA, in desolate semi-desert spinifex country, there can still be seen a few scarce remains of one of the best-kept secrets of Australian involvement in World War II."*

*The West Australian, 2021*

William George Bridgman (Bill) was a South Australian Serviceman who fought in World War II. He was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 1922, in Balaklava. Bill lived in Balaklava with both of his parents, Cyril George and Maryanne Lewis Bridgman, along with his brother Donald. During his childhood he attended Balaklava Primary School and after finishing school, he commenced an apprenticeship with a local hairdresser Len Nancarrow. *"When he received his first pay packet, he purchased a large glass cake stand for his Mother which I still have"* (M. Short, 2021). When not at work, he loved to go horse riding.

After enlisting on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, Bill was placed in the 9<sup>th</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Regiment (Balaklava Troop) as a trooper and was assigned a service number for his involvement,

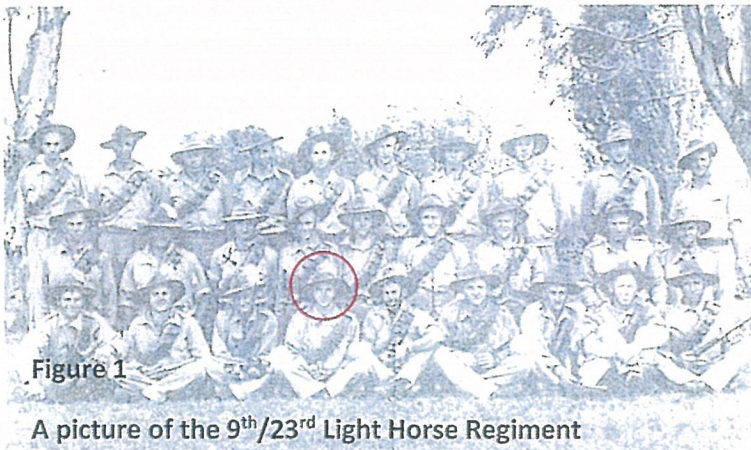


Figure 1

A picture of the 9<sup>th</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse Regiment

S7277. The Light Horse Regiment was a mounted rifles unit that consisted of twenty-eight men. While being a part of the Light Horse Regiment, Bill was required to attend training camps and parades for three years or the duration of the war. Bill was discharged from the Light Horse Regiment on the 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1941, as he had

successfully applied for the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), service number 39850, on the 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1941 (DVA's Nominal Rolls, 2021).

Bill reported to No. 5 Recruiting Office, North Terrace, Adelaide, before being posted to No. 1 Recruit Depot at Laverton, Victoria. He was then sent to the RAAF Signal Schools at Pt. Cook on the 11<sup>th</sup> August for wireless transmitter training. Once he completed the training, Bill was transferred to Queensland Headquarters, North Area on the 29<sup>th</sup> August 1941. He was later promoted to Signals Clerk on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1942. Sadly, in May, 1942, Bill's father passed away, aged 46 years. Like Bill, his father was also involved in serving his country during World War 1. Cyril returned from the war after being shot in the hand and suffering psychological trauma. *"He was very aware that this had been a very difficult and stressful time for his Mother as he and his brother were both enlisted in the RAAF at this time"* (M. Short, 2021). Before Cyril passed away, Bill's leave records show that he was able to return and spend a few days with him.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1942, Bill was transferred to the Townsville Wireless Transmitting Station where he would visit Mt. Saint John Zoo with other servicepeople from Australia and America to go horse riding.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1942, Bill joined the 10 Signals unit RAAF, where he performed functions such as providing early warning of Japanese air attacks and providing surveillance of Japanese shipping and ground based troops.

Bill was soon transferred to Papua New Guinea and arrived in Port Moresby on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1942. He was a part of the wireless transmitting personnel who provided and reported early warning of Japanese air raids, and their movements in the South-Wets Pacific area.

During the month of January 1943, Bill's best friend was tragically killed by a when his leg was blown apart from a Japanese shell. He died on a stretcher that was covered in his blood on his way back to hospital and was buried in the newly developed Bomana War Cemetery. Photos of Bill saying his goodbyes at Ron Nancarrow's gravesite are still in his photo album. On the 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1943, Bill was promoted to Sergeant and remained in Papua New Guinea until the 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1943.

For the Japanese, taking Papua New Guinea was a small step if they were to capture Australia. The main battle that stopped them was the Battle of the Coral Sea in May, 1942. If the Allies had lost, the Japanese could have easily taken Australia, but the Allies victory meant that they instead landed at Gona and Buna and began to cross the Owen Stanley Ranges (M. Short, 2021). This path is now known as the Kokoda Track.

Upon returning to South Australia, Bill was sent to No. 4 Embarkation Depot at Mitcham, on the property of Scotch College. Bill was then posted at the No. 73 Operational Base Unit (OBU) on the 8<sup>th</sup> December, 1943, but was more commonly known as the Corunna Downs Airfield. This was named after a nearby cattle station, that to this day, is still open. The airfield is about 36 kilometres from Marble Bar, which both Australian and American soldiers visited often.

The Corunna Downs Airfield consisted of two intersecting runways, both made from bitumen. Around the airfield was 6 kilometres of taxiways, but sadly are now indistinguishable. (Corunna Downs the Invisible WW2 Airfield, 2021).

## Strange coincidence?

On the 2nd and 8th May I was helping at an Australian American Friendship Work Stall in the Flanders mall, when I spoke with an elderly couple who stated that during WW2 they were caretakers at Mt. Saint John Zoo, and that they had Australian and American Servicemen calling at the Zoo who became regular visitors and friends.

About 10 days later, I (Steve) 15th May I received a call from an ex serviceman named Bill Birdgerman, who was on a Townsville-South revisited trip. He showed me some photos of himself, other Aussie Servicemen, and scenes of Townsville and Magnetic Island.

I asked him where the boys had been riding the horses and he replied, "they used to go out to Mt. Saint John Zoo often" while they were stationed in Townsville.

Unfortunately, I did not get the name of the elderly couple. I hope they will see this letter, or someone will tell them about it.

Please contact Peter 71 5406 (ah) and we will arrange for Bill and you to get together again.

Peter Aernati  
Hale Street  
Stanton Hill



Figure 2

A newspaper article featuring a photo of Bill riding a horse

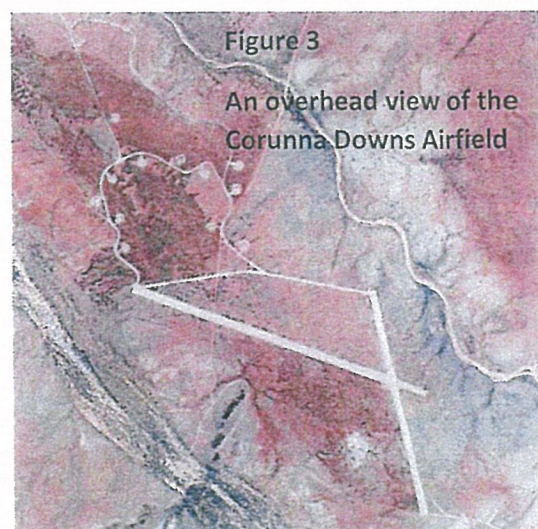


Figure 3

An overhead view of the Corunna Downs Airfield



Figure 4  
The B-24 Liberator

Along with the runways, the airfield consisted of around 20 horseshoe-shaped bunkers, each holding one of the massive B-24 Liberator bomber planes flown by Bill and both the Australian (RAAF) and American soldiers (USAAF). Airmen and women were able to conduct multiple bombing raids on Japanese bases and shipping. After each flight, the planes would be hidden in the bunkers so they could be refueled and

rearmed. These bunkers were strategically positioned so that if the base ever did get bombed, the damage would be minimized (Corunna Downs the Invisible WW2 Airfield, 2021).

Around 300 soldiers lived at the base, most living in four-man tents. There were scorpions, snakes, tropical storms, freezing temperatures at night, boiling water until 9pm and no refrigeration.

The Japanese's reconnaissance aircrafts searched extensively for a base that they knew must exist, but all of their attempts ended in failure due to the base's heavy camouflage with netting and spinifex and being carefully hidden (The West, 2021).

Figure 5  
A windmill at Corunna Downs



Corunna Downs played a large part in keeping the Japanese at bay. During the war, there was no mention of anything about Corunna Downs on the radio or in the papers. This was to make sure that the Japanese had no knowledge about this secret airbase. This gave our aircrafts the advantage of surprise.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1945, after a long tiring fight, William George Bridgman was discharged from the RAAF and was finally able to return to see his mother again.

Bill returned to Adelaide and was married to Constance Margaret Vanstone and had two children, Margaret and Graeme. Bill worked and owned a hairdressing shop on Duthie Street, Unley, for many years after his discharge (L. Heinrich, 2021).

For the entirety of Bill's service, he showed pride and courage, and for this he received the 1939-45 Star, Pacific Star, War medal 1939-45, Australian service medal 1939-45, and the Returned from Active Service badge (M. Short, 2021).

Every year, Bill would commemorate ANZAC Day by attending the ANZAC Day Dawn Services at the Mitcham Reserve. In the centre was a Rotunda where the Bugler would play the Last Post and Reveille. After the service, Bill would return to the club rooms for crumpets and



When it was first announced that our class was going to be completing the ANZAC Spirit Prize, I immediately asked family members for someone in our family who served in World War I or World War II. With their suggestions, I decided that I wanted to discover more about my great-grandfather. After learning about his background, I began researching when and where he enlisted and where he was transferred to. I discovered that he moved around a lot during his time in the war, and that he served as an Airman in the RAAF for most of his service.

I used a range of primary and secondary sources to gather information to complete this task. I used primary sources such as his enrolment and discharge forms as well as photos. I enjoyed looking through all of his black and white photos because they showed exactly what it was like, and I had never seen photos like that before. The secondary sources that I used were information from family members such as my grandmother and mother, websites, and newspaper articles. They both gave me quite a bit of information, especially my grandmother, about what he did during the war. Sadly, due to breakdowns in family relationships, I found that information was harder to source.

I was fascinated by the information I found in the websites about Corunna Downs, as they were descriptive and really painted a picture in your mind. I was surprised that such a huge part of Australia's war history is so little know about.

While completing this task, I wanted to make Bill proud. I wanted to make sure that people would remember what he did for his country and what he was really like as a person. He was a very caring person and I wanted to make sure that I included this in my essay.

Thank you for taking the time to read my application. I am grateful that along with my family, I have been given the opportunity to learn more about the life of my great-grandpa, William George Bridgman. Being Bill's first great grandson, I feel privileged to have been able to research his life. The RAAF symbol on Bill's gravesite now means so much more and I feel a much deeper connection with my family.

(Part B : 382 words)



Figure 7

Bill's grave at the Minlaton cemetery

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Figure 3 :

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Figure 4 :

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Figure 5 :

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Figures 1, 2, 6 :

M. Short

Figure 7 :

L. Heinrich

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