

# Private Benjamin Gower Hardy

The soldier I have chosen for my research is Private Benjamin Gower Hardy. My reasoning behind choosing him is his connection to my hometown of Cowra, NSW, it being the site of a Prisoner of War Camp in the Second World War.

Benjamin was the third child of Benjamin Gower Hardy, a perfume manufacturer from England and his Australian born wife Emily, née Cole. He was born on the 28 August 1898 in Marrickville, Sydney.



He lived with his mother and sister in Willoughby, a suburb in Sydney, 8km north of the CBD. Those who knew Benjamin described him as a tall, shy man who never married. He gained a positive reputation in the community as he often helped neighbours repair electronics and vehicles, took in stray animals from the streets and was a keen fisherman.

Pre enlistment Benjamin worked as a motor driver and mechanic for Dalgety & Co. Ltd a global stock and station agency.

On 25 September 1941 when Benjamin was mobilised as a private in the Citizen Military Force he was deemed too old for active service, being 42 years old at the time.

The Citizen Military Force is what we now call the Australian Army reserve.

In Benjamin's case he was placed there due to his age, making him suitable to work on Australian soil rather than on the front lines. He was attached to the 7th Garrison Battalion where he soon gained a reputation for his skill at operating the Vickers Machine-Gun.

On 12 February 1944 he was transferred to the 22nd Garrison Battalion stationed at No.12 Prisoner of War Camp near Cowra, which housed prisoners from Japan, Italy, Formosa, and Korea.



At 2am on 5 August 1944, the Japanese Prisoners decide to stage a mass breakout, as surrender is against their warrior code. They began by setting their tents alight and storming the fences with various objects improvised as weapons and blankets to nullify the barbed wire fences.

During the chaos Benjamin and one of his fellow soldiers, Ralph Jones, pulled their coats over their pyjamas and rushed to their Vickers Machine-gun which was mounted on a trailer. When they arrived at the gun the Japanese had already breached the perimeter and were rushing towards the gun attempting to seize it and turn it against their captors.

With Benjamin firing the weapon and Ralph feeding the bullets they managed to take down several of the Japanese before they were overwhelmed and beaten to death. However, when the Japanese turned the machine gun on the guards they found the weapon would not fire because Benjamin, in his final moments had ripped the firing bolt from the Gun in a final act of bravery for his fellow soldiers.

After the sacrifice of Benjamin and Ralph during the breakout their fellow soldiers made it their job to make sure the two of them were properly recognised for their actions. In July 1945, after nothing had been done to acknowledge the two men, Sergeant Sydney Little sent a letter to the Minister of the Army requesting that the two be awarded for their bravery.

The Minister's department was planning to decline the request but before doing so decided to contact Monty Brown who had resigned from the military three months prior. Brown decided to support the request for the awards, He then began to work with other supporters of the award to gather the necessary information for the application process.

In 1948 Brown received a letter from the minister's office recommending the George cross would be most applicable to the two. After five long years of work and fighting for the two men's recognition the newly elected Minister of the Army, Jos Francis, declared on the 14th of April 1950 that the families of Private Benjamin Gower Hardy and Private Ralph Jones were to be awarded with the George Cross as recognition for the two men's bravery during the breakout in Cowra.

Tragically though a cruel twist of fate, just four days prior to this announcement Benjamin's mother passed away. Two years after the announcement Benjamin's sister, Beatrice Hardy was presented her brothers medal which she would hold until 1985 where she would hand over the medal to Gavin Fry, a representative from the Australian War Memorial, so that Benjamin's story could be documented and protected.

Whilst at the War memorial in Canberra I was lucky to locate Benjamin's medals and take a moment to reflect on his heroic sacrifice and legacy which I am honoured to share with you in this piece

By Rowan Wheeler

