

## Lance Corporal William ‘Billy’ Robert Peter SHADWICK

Service number 1875632  
Royal Engineers  
1 Supply Base Depot  
Killed in action on 17 June 1940, aged 20

Billy was born in London but raised in Wells. He died in what is still Britain's worst-ever maritime disaster, when the troopship HMT Lancastria was sunk by German bombs when evacuating troops from St Nazaire in western France. This disaster was hushed up at the time and is still not widely known about today.



Billy in uniform

Photograph courtesy of Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Billy's niece

William was born in London on 7 January 1921, to Jonathon Strong Shadwick, a ham factor and bacon curer, and Ellen Elizabeth née King. William's mother, Ellen, was from Wells. Her first husband was Ernest Welsford who died in the Great War and is commemorated on the Wells War Memorial. After the Great War, Ellen and their daughter, Gwendoline, moved to London, where she worked as a housekeeper for Mr Jonathon Strong Shadwick, who was 65 when they married in 1920.

They moved to Wells in the late 1920s and lived in Silver Street. In 1927 they bought a cottage and moved to West Bradley (about 1 mile south east of West Pennard). Billy's father died in 1932, and they moved back to Wells and lived with Ellen's first husband's sister and her husband, Eleanor and Joseph Vincent, at 10, Union Street.

Ellen then got a housekeeping job with Mr Thomas Martin in Poole, who in late 1938 decided that it would be more proper if they were to be married. In September 1939 they were living at 37, Lincoln Road, Poole, along with Ellen's mother Caroline. Billy went to the Catholic school in Poole and later worked in either Boots or Timothy Whites in Bournemouth.

Billy enlisted in Bournemouth and lied about his age as he was a year too young to join up. He joined the Royal Engineers and after training was posted to 1 Supply Base Depot, Royal Engineers, which was in France with the British Expeditionary Force.

As the Germans advanced into France in 1940, a quarter of a million troops were cut off to the south of the German advance. These were mainly logistic and support troops and included Billy's unit. After the evacuation from Dunkirk, Operation Ariel evacuated these Allied troops and civilians from ports in western France from 15 to 25 June 1940.

The HMT Lancastria was a pre-war ocean liner that had been requisitioned as a troop ship at the start of the war. In the early hours of 17 June, the Lancastria, along with some thirty other merchant vessels, anchored in the Loire Estuary outside the French port of St Nazaire. In the morning she started to take on troops and civilians, including Billy's unit.

In the middle of the afternoon there was a German air raid, and the Lancastria was hit by four bombs and sank 20 minutes later. According to Brian Crabb ('The Forgotten Tragedy: The Story of the Sinking of HMT Lancastria'):

Crammed with approximately 6,000 troops, RAF personnel, civilians and crew, a third of whom did not survive, this incident remains Britain's worst-ever maritime disaster but, like many other shipping disasters of the Second World War, it remains little known today.

Following the successful evacuation of Dunkirk only weeks before, Winston Churchill initially forbade media disclosure of the event. Over a month passed before the story eventually reached the national newspapers, via American journalists.

Billy died when the Lancastria sank.

He has no known grave, other than the Lancastria, but is commemorated on Column 23, Dunkirk Memorial, Nord, France. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

In 1939, his step-sister, Gwendoline, married Bert Mallows in Wells. Her brother in-law, Alfred Mallows, is also commemorated on the war memorial.

We would like to thank Mrs Lavina Parfitt, Billy's niece, for her help with this article.