

Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0 – Edition 2

17 October

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In this edition, I am writing about the city of Cowra.

As I briefly mentioned in the previous edition, the very day after I arrived in Sydney to take up my post, I was fortunate to have the privilege of visiting Cowra. Located to the west of Sydney, Cowra is about a 5-hour drive and is home to just under 13,000 people.

Among my predecessors and other Japanese involved with Australia over the years, Cowra is referred to as the “Spiritual Home” of Japan-Australia relations.

In his “Consul-General’s Newsletter”, my immediate predecessor explained the history of Cowra in detail, so there will be some duplication in this explanation of the “Cowra Breakout”.

The Cowra Breakout refers to the mass breakout during the Second World War by Japanese prisoners of war from the internment camp in Cowra before dawn on 5 August 1944. At the time, there were close to 1,100 Japanese POWs at the camp which had previously been predominantly occupied by Italian POWs. Due to crowding at the camp, it was decided to separate Japanese commissioned and non-commissioned officers from the other soldiers, who would be sent to another camp. This decision is said to have sparked the outbreak. Lying behind this was the field service code decreed by the Minister of Army in January 1941 which stated that “the living should not suffer the disgrace of being a prisoner”. Japanese POWs feared that family and relatives back in Japan would be accused of being “unpatriotic”, and to avoid this, many gave false names when captured. Added to this sense of being in a “state of dishonour”, the “loss of unity among the Japanese POWs” if the officers and other soldiers were separated spurred the soldiers into action.

A picture of the psychological state around this event is portrayed in the 1991 book “The Cowra Breakout Bugler - Why did the zero fighter pilot die?” (カウラの突撃ラッパ～零戦パイロットはなぜ死んだか *Kaura no totsugeki rappa : zerosen pairotto wa naze shinda ka*) by NAKANO Fujio, which won the Japan Non-Fiction Award. The book focuses on fighter pilot MINAMI Tadao (pseudonym). It also notes how the Australian army treated the POWs fairly, giving them a certain degree of autonomy and allowing recreation such as baseball to take place.

The breakout ended in failure. At the sound of Minami Tadao's bugle, the Japanese POWs, using 'weapons' such as cutlery that they had to hand, attempted their breakout. The result was 234 people died and the more than 300 POWs who fled were recaptured. Four Australian soldiers also died during the incident.

Today, a Japanese war cemetery lies next to the Australian war cemetery in Cowra. Members of the Cowra RSL looked after the graves of their former enemy in the same way as they maintained the graves of their own fallen. Later, the graves of Japanese who had died while interned in other camps around Australia were also relocated to Cowra. There are 524 graves in the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery.

The cemetery is beautifully maintained to this day, impressively so, and this is thanks to the goodwill and efforts of many stakeholders, including Cowra Regional Council.

Their Majesties the Emperor Emeritus and Empress Emerita of Japan visited the cemetery in 1973 as the then Crown Prince and Princess, and Their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Akishino also visited in 1995.

On the second day of my visit to Cowra, I joined Mayor Bill West and many others to participate in the Service of Respect, and I laid a wreath at both the Australian and the Japanese War Cemeteries. The Japanese choir "Sydney Sakura Choir" and the Cowra Vocal Ensemble also performed during the service.

I will long remember seeing the Cowra choir sing the Japanese national anthem "Kimi-ga-yo" and the Sakura Choir sing "Advance Australia Fair".



During my first posting to England in the 2000s, I was involved in Japan-UK reconciliation. One of my important missions was regular exchange and dialogue with British veterans who were former POWs.

Reconciliation between Japan and Australia has taken years of effort and hard work by those who came before us.

In this process, Cowra has played a major role overcoming war, hatred and resentment, contributing to Japan-Australia reconciliation by showing a spirit of goodwill and tolerance, and building friendship and connections. It is for this reason that it is called the “Spiritual Home” of Japan-Australia relations. I cannot but feel profound respect and gratitude.



Not far from the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries is a beautiful Japanese garden, considered to be the most beautiful in Australia. It was completed thanks to the hard work and cooperation of multiple stakeholders with the aim of commemorating the souls of the Japanese who died, reconciliation between Japan and Australia, and friendship for the future. Mr Bob Griffiths, Chairman of the Japanese Garden, explained to me how Mr NAKAJIMA Ken, one of Japan’s foremost garden designers, constructed the garden without moving a single one of the large rocks on the site.

The day I arrived in Cowra, I had the opportunity to participate in the “Sakura Festival” at the garden. Tea ceremony, ikebana, Japanese dance, choral performance, kimono, archery, martial arts, magic and sleight of hand – these were among the many performances and activities that participants could take in, all set against the beautiful background of the garden. I also saw exchange students from Seikei High School hard at work at one of the stalls; Seikei High School and Cowra High School have a long-running exchange program.

Together with the cooperation of many people in Cowra, the friendship that our two countries share today has been built not by averting our eyes from that unfortunate time in our past but by reflecting on it and striving for reconciliation.

In July 2014, then Prime Minister Abe addressed both Houses of the Australian Parliament. He began his speech “[W]hen we Japanese started out again after the Second World War, we thought long and hard over what had happened in the past”, declaring “I wish to state my great and whole-hearted gratitude for the spirit of tolerance and for the friendship that Australia has shown to Japan. We in Japan will never forget your open-minded spirit nor the past history between us,” and he concluded by expressing his firm expectation for a bright future of Japan-Australia relations.

I feel both honoured and fortunate that my “start to work” was a visit to Cowra where I made the acquaintance of so many welcoming people.



Reference: Cowra Japanese War Cemetery

(Online Database)

<https://www.cowrajapanesecemetery.org/jp/> (Japanese)

<https://cowrajapanesecemetery.org/> (English)