

A record of exchange as the Consul-General of Japan in Sydney (Edition 8)

Attending the 81st anniversary commemorations of the Cowra Breakout

25 August

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On 5 August, I attended the 81st anniversary commemorations of the Cowra Breakout, so this time, I would like to talk about the relationship between Japan and Cowra. The Cowra prisoner of war internment camp and Cowra's ties with Japan were written about in detail by my immediate predecessor ([Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0](#)) and his predecessor ([Consul-General of Japan in Sydney's Newsletter](#)). As such, I will pick up a few new points and write about my own impressions, but the basic facts are as follows.

Cowra lies about 310 kilometres west of Sydney. During the Second World War, there was an internment camp in Cowra and approximately 1,100 Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) were being held in the camp when a group of the Japanese POWs conducted a mass breakout before dawn on 5 August 1944. The "Cowra Breakout" saw 234 Japanese and 4 Australian soldiers lose their lives. Every year on 5 August, the town of Cowra organises a commemoration of the Breakout at the Japanese War Cemetery, which was established in 1964. This year, Ambassador Suzuki came from Canberra to attend the event and I was also present.

I arrived in Cowra the day before the anniversary event and Mayor Paul Smith and Mr Lawrance Ryan, former Chair of the Cowra Breakout Association, kindly guided me through a photographic exhibition at the Cowra Regional Art Gallery showing Cowra during the war. The photos displayed revealed Cowra originally had a military training camp and a munitions factory, and during the war, there was a plant manufacturing alcohol as a substitute for petrol and a factory producing canned food for the Allied forces. Cowra was chosen as the site for the internment camp because of the presence of the military training camp and because the town was connected by rail. Looking into this in a little more detail, when the Second World War broke out in Europe in 1939, the British military was searching for somewhere to intern many Italian POWs it had captured on the North African front. Australia with its vast territory was asked to house a camp, and after Australia proposed some candidate locations, it was narrowed down to Cowra. Thus, the first POWs to be held in the Cowra internment camp were Italian, and Japanese POWs were interned there from 1943.





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What I most remember from the exhibition is the photos of the prisoners who were held there. They showed the Italian POWs who gathered together and enjoyed having their photos taken. In contrast, I learned that the Japanese POWs had turned their faces away from the camera so that their faces didn't show. The reason for this was that the photos could have been handed over to Japan by the International Red Cross and people in Japan would know that they had been captured. It was not just a matter for feeling shame at being captured alive, but also because the Japanese POWs were afraid that people would point at their family members and talk about them behind their backs. I was also told that the Italian POWs went out to help on farms close to the camp and were on good terms with the local people. Hearing this, I was strongly impressed by the different attitudes the POWs had to being captured.

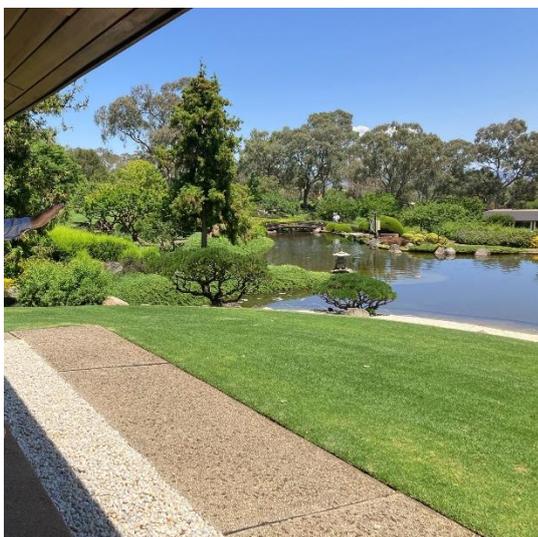


The 81st anniversary event organised by the Cowra RSL next morning was held not at the site of the POW camp but at the Japanese and Australian War Cemeteries. Attending the event were the mayor of Cowra and other Cowra dignitaries, and on the Japan side Ambassador Suzuki, me and other representatives of Japan, together with many students including students from Cowra High School as well as an exchange student from Cowra High School's exchange partner, Seikei High School in Japan. The aforementioned attendees laid wreaths, first at the Australian section of the cemetery in memory of the Australians resting there, including the four soldiers who were killed in the Breakout, and then at the Japanese war cemetery. In the case of the wreath laying at the Japanese cemetery, the Cowra Youth Council placed Senbazuru (a thousand cranes) as a prayer for world peace, and afterwards I saw many young people laying wreaths. This confirmed to me that Cowra is not just a symbol of post-

war reconciliation but that this type of exchange in Cowra passes on the legacy to the next generation. The ceremony at the Japanese cemetery concluded with a reading by Reverend James Wilson Tetsuyu from Amida-ji, a Jodoshu temple in Brisbane, and as I listened to his words, I prayed from my heart that the souls of the fallen were at peace.



After the ceremony, the participants moved to the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre. The garden is one of the few authentic *kaiyushiki* (strolling) gardens found outside Japan and it was designed by the late Ken Nakajima, a leading Japanese garden designer. A tea ceremony was held in one corner of the garden. At first, I thought that being in the wonderful Japanese garden, there would be a Japanese tea ceremony (in fact, at the Koyo Matsuri in May, Urasenke members had demonstrated a genuine Japanese tea ceremony in the very same location), but tea and scones were served instead! The reason behind this lies in a turn of events shortly after the Breakout. As the search for the escaped POWs continued, on the ninth day after the incident, 3 emaciated Japanese POWs turned up at the house of the Weir family, located some distance from the centre of Cowra. The lady of the house, Mrs May Weir, served them some freshly baked scones with tea, and as they were eating, the Australian authorities rushed over to detain them. Of course, serving scones and tea somehow helped her buy some time for the authorities to arrive, but when they did, Mrs Weir saw that the POWs still hadn't finished eating and asked the authorities to wait until they had. Forty years later in 1984, one of those POWs visited the Weir's home. May Weir had passed away, but the former POW shared his memories with her son and daughter. In the midst of the Breakout and its many victims, this heartwarming episode has been remembered and passed on. The jug which held the tea on that day is still carefully displayed.



In this way, the people of Cowra have over many years carefully maintained both war cemeteries, and in the Japanese war cemetery, there are more than 500 Japanese graves, including not only the victims of the Breakout, but also Japanese who died at other internment camps in Australia. Furthermore, every year on 5 August, people in Cowra, including many young people, reflect on the events of the Cowra Breakout, and each year, we reaffirm the importance of Cowra as a keystone of the efforts made over the 80 years since the end of the war towards Japan-Australia reconciliation. By a curious coincidence, the Australian Government announced on 5 August this year that it had chosen the 'Mogami' frigate. It goes without saying that the goodwill and efforts of many people in Cowra have contributed significantly to Japan-Australia reconciliation, and moreover have greatly fostered trust among Australians for cooperation with Japan, even in such a core area as national security. I am exceedingly grateful for this.

Furthermore, when I visit the Cowra Japanese garden, I am surprised at how incredibly well maintained the garden is. However, I think we can see the high regard the city of Cowra has for the garden by the fact that the chair of the garden's board of directors is former mayor, Mr Bill West. Every year in September, the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre holds the Sakura Matsuri or Cherry Blossom Festival, and I have heard that there are many representative Japanese cultural performances and demonstrations, such as the tea ceremony, ikebana (Japanese flower arranging), choir, kimono, traditional dance and archery. Also, in May, there is the Koyo Matsuri (autumn leaves festival) which I have attended myself and enjoyed the splendour of the Japanese garden in autumn. I have also been treated by Mayor Smith to a taste of the delicious locally produced red wine called "Sakura".

Against the backdrop of this history of reconciliation, my office and I will do our utmost to support initiatives that promote active exchange among young people, who will carry the baton as the next generation, and thereby further broaden connections between Cowra and Japan. If you ever have the opportunity, please visit Cowra for yourself.

References:

- *Blankets on the Wire* Bullard, Steven (author), Tamura, Keiko (translator)
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- *A Town at War - Stories from Cowra during WWII* Apthorpe, Graham (English)