

Consul-General of Japan in Sydney's Newsletter

No. 19 Cowra as a Bridge between Australia and Japan

10 July 2020

I visited Cowra for the first time since arriving in Sydney to assume my position as Consul-General. Cowra is a small town of around 13,000 people in inland NSW. It is located approximately 310 kilometres west of Sydney (about 4 hours by car) and 90 kilometres north of Canberra (about 2 hours by car).

During World War II, a prisoner of war camp was set up in Cowra. In 1944, Japanese POWs staged a mass breakout which led to the deaths of 234 Japanese and 4 Australian soldiers. After the war, in 1964, a Japanese war cemetery was established. Still later, a Japanese garden was opened and cherry trees planted, and various kinds of grass-roots exchange were held in the town.

In Cowra, local people carefully preserve the history of war and reconciliation, and of mutual understanding and exchange between Australia and Japan, and they do so in a way that all can see. To this day, the town conducts various types of exchange activities. Thanks to my visit, I realized what an important role Cowra plays as “a bridge between Australia and Japan”.

In this consul-general's newsletter, as I follow the footsteps of the history of Australia-Japan relations that are to be found in Cowra, let us reflect on the future of cooperation and exchange between our two countries.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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**The burial of Japanese POWs immediately after the Breakout
(August 1944, Australian War Memorial)**

● **Cowra Breakout and the Japanese War Cemetery**

Arriving in Cowra on 25 June, the first place I visited was the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries, where I laid wreaths together with the Mayor of Cowra Shire Council, Cr Bill West.

In 1941, a prisoner of war (POW) camp was established in Cowra, and at first, Italians were interned at the facility. Japanese prisoners arrived from 1943 onwards, and by July 1944, there were just over 1,100 Japanese POWs. On 4 August 1944, the Australian Army advised that Japanese non-commissioned officers and soldiers would be separated, and the soldiers would be moved to a separate camp. On the same evening, Japanese prisoners voted to stage a mass breakout.

Just before dawn on the following day, 5 August, a bugle was sounded and approximately 1,000 Japanese POWs began their escape. The Australian soldiers on watch opened fire, and 234 Japanese were killed. So too were 4 Australian soldiers attacked by the POWs. All escapees were caught and returned to the camp, then they were moved to Hay camp, and after the war, they were sent back to Japan in April 1946. The Japanese prisoners who died were buried in Cowra soon after the breakout.

The Japanese military of the day did not expect soldiers would ever be taken captive. According to the field service code decreed by the Minister of Army in 1941, 'Do not in death leave to posterity a stain on your honour by having suffered in life the disgrace of being a prisoner.' Soldiers were not meant to live when they were taken prisoner. For this reason, many Japanese prisoners self-declared false names and did not try to contact their families, who thought they had died in battle.

Under this type of national policy and in a situation where they could find nowhere to go, the prisoners sought an honourable death and resorted to the breakout which was tantamount to committing suicide. In fact, the response from the Japanese official media on this incident was to assert that there couldn't be any Japanese POWs in the camp to begin with and to criticise the Australian authorities for having killed Japanese civilians.



**Laying a wreath at the Australian War Cemetery
(25 June 2020)**

After the war, members of the Returned and Services League (RSL) Cowra sub-Branch looked after the cemetery for fallen Australian servicemen. At the same time, they cared for the neighbouring graves of their former Japanese enemies. After diplomatic relations were normalised between Australia and Japan, diplomatic officers of the Japanese Embassy in Canberra visited Cowra and reported that the Japanese cemetery was indeed being well maintained. Upon receiving this report, the then Ambassador of Japan Suzuki Tadakatsu suggested to the Home Government that all graves of Japanese who died in Australia during the war be moved to Cowra.

At the time, both the Australian and Japanese governments were discussing the issue of what should become of the graves of Japanese who died during the war. The possibility of returning the remains of the deceased to Japan was considered. However, in 1959, rather than repatriation, the policy was directed towards keeping them in Australia. Then, in 1962, it was decided that a Japanese war cemetery would be established in Cowra and that all Japanese who had died in Australia during the war would be reinterred at the official war cemetery.



**Laying a wreath at the Japanese War Cemetery
(25 June 2020)**

Thus, in 1964, the Japanese War Cemetery was established by the Government of Japan in Cowra, and 522 graves were dedicated within the cemetery for Japanese who died in Australia during the war, including Japanese civilians who died in internment camps in the country. The entrance and the memorial space were designed by Mr Yura Shigeru, who was an academic at the University of Melbourne at the time.

Their Majesties the Emperor Emeritus and Empress Emerita visited the cemetery and planted cherry trees during their visit to Australia in 1973 as the then Crown Prince and Princess of Japan. Many other members of the Imperial Family have visited the cemetery, and on each occasion, they have planted a cherry tree, and still today, at the cemetery and the Japanese garden, you can see these cherry trees with their plaques explaining who planted them.



**Cowra POW Breakout 75th Anniversary Art Installation
at the site of the former Cowra prisoners of war camp
(25 June 2020)**

Last year on 5 August, shortly before I arrived in Sydney, the 75th anniversary of the Cowra Breakout was commemorated. The only surviving former POW, Mr Murakami Teruo, attended and a wreath-laying ceremony was held. A new art installation was erected at the site of the former camp, which the day before, had been decorated by local people with origami crane lanterns.

On the occasion of the 75th anniversary year, a smartphone app called “Cowra Voices” was created to help pass on the history of war and reconciliation in Cowra. The content reflects the outcome of historical research and the efforts of many local people, and it is all conveyed not by written text but in people’s actual voices. The app was realised through the support of both the Australian and Japanese governments and Cowra Shire Council. When I was in Cowra, I listened to individual stories about the Japanese POWs buried at the cemetery.

Another project inspired by the 75th anniversary was the creation of the “Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database”. The database draws on various records such as Australian government official documents and brings together details about the individuals, including their name, place of birth, occupation and rank or affiliation, reason for internment (imprisonment), length of internment, details of the place of internment, movements during internment, cause of death and burial details. The database has been made public and can be searched online. It is a valuable resource which enables people today to know about the lives of the various Japanese people who rest at the cemetery, as well as connecting the deceased with their families.



**First Seikei Gakuen exchange student with Mayor Oliver and his wife and friend at Cowra Airport
(1970, Oliver Family Archives / Cowra Guardian)**

● 50 years of student exchange between Seikei and Cowra

After the establishment of the cemetery, exchange between Cowra and Japan developed further. Mayor Albert Oliver, who also served as the president of the Cowra RSL, believed that the key to achieving peace was by deepening mutual understanding through direct exchange between the youth of Australia and Japan, and he worked hard to establish a student exchange program for high school students.

In 1969, he visited Japan and spoke with candidate schools for exchange, and in 1970, the exchange program between Cowra High School and Seikei High School in Tokyo was realised. Every year, one student from each school does a year-long homestay while studying at the other school. The Cowra-Seikei High School Exchange Program has continued thanks to the efforts of the steering committee and this year marks its 50th anniversary. The current deputy mayor of Cowra, Cr Judi Smith, previously worked for more than 30 years as a Japanese language teacher at the very same Cowra High School.

Mayor Oliver also worked hard to have Cowra included on the inaugural 1977 tour of Australia and New Zealand by the “Chor Farmer” choir, a male choir led by old boys from the Tokyo University of Agriculture. After its first visit, the Chor Farmer choir has continued to visit Cowra every other year to give performances and lay flowers at the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries, helping to deepen Australia-Japan exchange.

Later in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, about 300 students from Australia and Japan gathered in Cowra for a youth forum. The youth forum was also held in the following year.



**At Cowra Japanese Garden with Mayor Bill West (right)
and garden Chairman Bob Griffiths (left)
(26 June 2020)**

● Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre

In the 1970s, concrete plans were devised to construct a Japanese garden in memory of the former POWs and reconciliation between Australia and Japan. The first stage of the garden was completed and opened in 1978, thanks to the efforts of then CEO of Cowra Tourism, Mr Don Kibbler, former Mayor Oliver and Ambassador Okawara Yoshio, together with the support of the Australian Federal Government, the NSW Government, the Japan World Expo 1970 Commemorative Fund, Japanese companies and Japanese residents. Later, the efforts of the Australia-Japan Society of Cowra Chairman, Mr Tony Mooney, and businessman, Mr Tokura Katsunori, together with the support of Tokyo Metropolitan Government, resulted in the completion and opening of the second stage of the garden in 1986.

When I visited the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre on 26 June, I was fortunate to receive an explanation by its chairman, Mr Bob Griffiths. The designer of the garden was Mr Nakajima Ken, one of Japan's leading landscape designers. He created a genuine KAIYUSHIKI (strolling style) garden, making the most of the Australian granite and eucalyptus trees already on the site. According to Mr Nakajima, the stones at the highest point of the garden -- the "guardian stone", which supports the whole garden, and the "shadow stone", upon which gods descend from heaven -- had been placed there previously by divine skill, and you can see coming down to rest on the shadow stone the spirits that ascended to heaven in Cowra. He considered the garden to be his best work, and after his death in the year 2000, his ashes were scattered by his family around the base of the shadow stone in accordance with his wishes.



**At the Cowra Japanese Cultural Centre with Chairman Griffiths
(26 June 2020)**

Attached to the garden is the Japanese Cultural Centre. Here art works and artefacts are displayed that have been donated over the years from Japanese art exhibitions in Australia and by individuals and groups visiting from Japan. In the

cultural centre, you can really feel the history of exchange between Australia and Japan.

Even today, the garden and the cultural centre are gradually developing. The main gate was renovated thanks to a donation from a Japanese company, and the work was completed in 2016. With the support of the Australian Government and the cooperation of the Japanese Government, the tiles on the roof of the cultural centre were replaced with stone roof tiles from Shimane Prefecture (the tiles had recently become available on the Australian market), and in February this year, a completion ceremony was held.

The Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre holds a Sakura Matsuri most years in September - the season for HANAMI or 'cherry blossom viewing'- and last year, the cherry blossom festival marked its 30th anniversary. Every year, many people visit to enjoy performances such as Japanese TAIKO drumming, SHAKUHACHI flute and aikido; demonstrations such as calligraphy and ikebana; and workshops such as kimono, origami or the tea ceremony. This year due to COVID-19, it is still uncertain whether the festival will go ahead, but I hope that Sakura Matsuri will be able to be held safely and successfully.



**Saburo Nagakura Park situated between the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries and the remains of the Prisoner of War camp
(25 June 2020)**

- **Cherry tree planting and growing exchange**

Moving on in time, exchange events between Australia and Japan continued to develop. In 1988, as part of events to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of modern Australia, Cowra Shire Council announced the construction of “Sakura Avenue”, an approximately 5 kilometre avenue to be planted with 1,988 cherry trees, connecting the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries with the site of the former POW camp and the Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre. The avenue was created by sponsorship: each tree has a plaque engraved with the name of the individual who sponsored the tree and the name of local child. The abovementioned Sakura Matsuri began in 1990. Cherry trees donated by Prime Ministers Hashimoto and Abe when they visited Australia have also been planted in front of the Japanese garden and at the site of the former POW camp.

Another example of exchange is the establishment in the 1990s of the Saburo Nagakura Foundation in Cowra, the private gift of Mr Saburo Nagakura, who was president of Kyushu Electric in the 1980s. He had the opportunity to visit Cowra when doing business in uranium and granite and was greatly impressed by the Australian and Japanese War Cemeteries. In 1989, the Saburo Nagakura Park was established on Sakura Avenue, and the park achieved its current state during the 1990s under then Mayor Bruce Miller. The Foundation is now managed by the son, Mr Nagakura Seiji, and it still contributes to the maintenance of the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre and the Sakura Avenue. Due to these connections, a delegation led by the Governor of Fukuoka and the Head of the Prefectural Assembly visited from Japan to attend the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Cowra Breakout.

Yet another example of exchange is the visit in 1988 by Mr Don Kibbler and Mr Tony Mooney, who were managing the Cowra Japanese Garden, to the former Naoetsu POW camp in Niigata Prefecture. In the same year, they revisited Naoetsu, this time leading a group of Australian priests and a former Australian POW of the Naoetsu camp, and a memorial service was held for the 60 Australian POWs who died in the camp. This was the impetus for the founding in 1995 of the Peace Memorial Park and Exhibition Hall at the site of the former Naoetsu POW camp, and the opening ceremony was attended by former POWs and their family or descendants. In 2003, a Peace and Friendship Agreement was exchanged between Cowra and Joetsu City, where the former Naoetsu POW camp is located, and Joetsu City sends groups of junior and senior high school students to Cowra to study about peace.

During my visit, Mayor West explained to me that Cowra does not have a sister city because of the very fact that it engages in exchange with *all* of Japan.



**With Mayor West at the Australian Peace Bell
(25 June 2020)**

- **The Australian Peace Bell**

It was because of these efforts by Cowra towards peace that Japan's World Peace Bell Association chose Cowra as the Australian location to house a replica of the United Nations' Peace Bell, and in 1992, the Peace Bell was erected in the square next to the Cowra Civic Centre. On the "Cowra Voices" smartphone app, then Mayor Rod Blume recounts what happened at that time. Every year, a ceremony is held here at the Australian Peace Bell on 21 September, World Peace Day.



**“Sakura” wine, produced locally and available at the Cowra
Visitor Information Centre
(25 June 2020)**

● Towards the future

This visit to Cowra made me realise that many people over many years have supported exchange in Cowra to achieve reconciliation between Australia and Japan — these people include committee members of the Cowra RSL, successive mayors, people related to the Cowra Japanese Garden and local schools, and general members of the community.

As a result of this widespread community support, symbols of Australia-Japan friendship can be found in all kinds of places. For example, a locally produced shiraz wine called “Sakura” is for sale at the Tourist Information Centre.

I would like many Japanese and Australians to know about Cowra and how it embodies the history of reconciliation and exchange between Australia and Japan. I hope that Japanese who have connections with Australians, including

Japanese nationals living in Australia, and Australians who have connections with Japanese visit Cowra to experience this for themselves.

The cultural committee of the Japanese Society of Sydney organises an overnight bus tour to Cowra every September to coincide with the Sakura Matsuri and memorial service for war dead. I also think that Japanese high school students, who come to Australia on school trips or to do short-term study or exchange, could really learn so much if they included a trip to Canberra and Cowra.

As the world faces the immediate difficulties caused by COVID-19, it is to be hoped that going forward, Japan and Australia show leadership and cooperate ever more closely for the peace and prosperity of the world, including in politics, security and business. To this end, I think it is important that everyone be aware of the history of reconciliation and exchange between Australia and Japan and that we work to build on this. I am determined to carry on Cowra's efforts to be a "bridge between Australia and Japan" and will do all I can to make the most of this bridge to deepen cooperation between our two countries.

Cowra Voices (smartphone tourism-guide app, 75th anniversary project)

<https://cowravoices.wordpress.com/>

Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database (75th anniversary project)

<https://www.cowrajapanesecemetery.org/>

Interview with former POW Murakami Teruo, who attended the Cowra Breakout 75th Anniversary events

<https://www.facebook.com/125982670754724/posts/2705892249430407>

Bullard, Steven (author), Tamura, Keiko (translator) *Blankets on the wire: The Cowra breakout and its aftermath* Australia-Japan Research Project, published by the Australian War Memorial, 2006

[http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp/ajrp2.nsf/Web1/Blankets/\\$file/Text.pdf?OpenElement](http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp/ajrp2.nsf/Web1/Blankets/$file/Text.pdf?OpenElement)

Cowra-Japan conversations (Australia-Japan Research Project)

<http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/ajrp/ajrp2.nsf/326ee6001189d518ca256d26007e1951/2682bdc2aa7efc2eca256f6b001acf14>

Article about the Cowra-Seikei High School Student Exchange Program (*Cowra Guardian*, 23 April 2020)

<https://www.cowraguardian.com.au/story/6729725/enduring-friendships-formed-during-the-cowra-seikei-high-student-exchange/>

“Chor-Farmer” male choir (Japanese)

<http://www.chor-farmer.com/>

Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre

<https://www.cowragarden.com.au/>

Naoetsu former POW camp, Peace Memorial Park and Exhibition Hall (Joetsu City)

<https://joetsukankonavi.jp/spot-en.php?id=377>

Cowra tourism information (Cowra Tourism)

<https://visitcowra.com.au/>

Graham Apthorpe, *A Town at War: Stories from Cowra in World War II*, Railmac Publications, 2008.

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