

## News from Under the Southern Cross – Edition 3. Visit to Cowra

24 February 2021

### (1) “Where on earth is Cowra?”

When I mention to Japanese acquaintances that “I’ve been to Cowra”, most of them would give the reaction “Where’s that exactly?” While this reaction is understandable given it is not well-known in Japan, when one considers the extraordinarily important role that Cowra has played in Japan-Australia relations, one can’t help but be disappointed with such a response.

Cowra is located about 190 kilometres north of Canberra, taking a good 2 hours to reach by car. Being a small town with a population of around 10,000, Cowra is a quiet, peaceful place, located in the midst of beautiful pasture with hills that roll on after one another like waves.

### (2) The Cowra Breakout

The reason this small town continues to be talked about by those involved in Japan-Australia relations over decades is because it was the scene of the largest escape attempt by prisoners of war in modern history – the ‘Cowra Breakout’. Just over 75 years ago, in the early morning darkness of the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1944, a group of Japanese prisoners of war held at the prisoner of war camp in Cowra attempted to escape. In the ensuing firefight, 234 Japanese prisoners of war and 4 Australian soldiers were killed. It was said that those 300 or more Japanese soldiers that did manage to escape were re-captured over the following week, and not one successfully managed to get away.



At the site of the Cowra POW Camp

A number of publications have been written about this incident, and the more I learned from reading works such as “The Bugle Call of Cowra” and “Blankets Over the Wire”, the stronger I felt that I had to visit this place soon after taking up my post in Australia.

### **(3) Emotions**

Although it was just before presentation of my credentials as Ambassador, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February I undertook a journey to Cowra. There I lowered my head in reverence and offered my sincerest condolences in memory of those precious lives lost on both the Japanese and Australian sides at that time. What particularly struck me was that despite the tragedy of the past, Mayor Bill West and the citizens of Cowra showed a full of sincere consideration and thoughtful gesture towards Japan. In 1964, one section of the Cowra general cemetery was set aside as “A gravesite for those Japanese that died during the war (Japanese War Cemetery)”, and the remains of Japanese prisoners of war and civilians who had perished during the war (524 in total) were recovered from across Australia for reburial at Cowra. The Japanese War Cemetery continues to be dutifully and beautifully maintained by the Cowra City Council and related stakeholders, and as a Japanese citizen I was profoundly moved.



Laying wreathes at the Japanese War Cemetery

Moreover, my visit to Cowra allowed me to see the nearby “Cowra Japanese Garden”, a dignified, strolling-style Japanese garden designed by garden architect Nakajima Ken in 1978 and maintained by the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre under the leadership of Chairman Bob Griffiths. It is probably the most beautiful Japanese garden in the Southern Hemisphere, and in Australia, with its tendency for dry weather, it manifests a unique world of water and verdant green. I allowed my imagination to run rampant as I envisaged the souls of brave soldiers, who perished with sense of chagrin and thoughts of home, being gently consoled by this garden which would remind them of Japan.

Being a tourist spot, the garden attracts over 40,000 Australians annually. When combined with the dramatic events of the breakout attempt at the Cowra prisoner of war camp, I felt that I truly understood the reason why Cowra is referred to as ‘the Spiritual Home of Japan-Australia Relations’.

In an interview with a local newspaper, I expressed my condolences for those precious lives sacrificed in the ‘Cowra Breakout’, and conveyed my deep respect and gratitude for the efforts of the citizens of Cowra in continuing to maintain and preserve the Japanese War Cemetery in good condition and for their ceaseless endeavours in building ties of friendship between Australia and post-war Japan.



The Cowra Japanese Garden

#### (4) Mutual Understanding and Mutual Trust

It has been viewed for many years that the mindset of Japanese soldiers, who on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 1944, amid the early morning darkness and severe cold of the Southern Hemisphere in mid-winter, took up no more than knives, forks, and baseball bats to face off against machine guns, was something that transcended the understanding of Australians. Even now it is sometimes described as “fanatic”. Indeed you may say so from today’s perspective. It is because many Japanese of today too, who enjoy living in peace, would struggle to understand such a mentality in full.

One might say that soldiers, bound by the military doctrine to ‘A soldier must never suffer the disgrace of being captured alive’, would prioritise their honour as a warrior. At the same time, I imagine how deep was the suffering and despair of those who, with thoughts of home, concern for their parents’ well-being, and unable to sever all thoughts of wives, sweethearts and children,

faced off against such insurmountable odds. I do feel that the development in mutual trust that exists today between Japan and Australia may help accelerate an understanding of the background of this tragic event.

#### **(5) Security Cooperation**

Japan and Australia, despite their history of conflict and the tragedy at Cowra, are now firmly engaged in promoting security cooperation with one another. The ADF and SDF periodically taken part in joint exercises and joint transiting of ocean areas, and in November of last year took part in the quadrilateral naval exercise “Malabar” together with India and the United States.

While lest we forget the past, it can serve as a basis for reconciliation and promote further cooperation. As I made my way back to Canberra, I realised that this is the path for us to repay to those precious Japanese and Australian lives lost at Cowra. I therefore plan to visit Cowra whenever the opportunity presents itself, starting with the memorial service on 5<sup>th</sup> August and the Cherry Blossom Festival in late September.

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