

News From Under the Southern Cross (Edition 74):

Cowra Autumn Festival and the Commemoration Service for the 80th Anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea

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Once again, I visited Cowra – this time is my 6th visit. As it has been a little less than one and a half years since my appointment as Ambassador, the pace of my visits has been enough to widen the eyes even of Cowra Mayor, Councillor Bill West. This is my report from my visit to Cowra, and the commemoration service which I attended upon my return to Canberra.

1. Japan-Australia Reconciliation

This time, I visited Cowra because I was once again invited to attend the annual Cowra Autumn Festival (you can find my report from last year's festival [here](#)).

The program began at the Cowra War Cemetery with a memorial service and wreath laying, during which my wife and I laid a wreath together with Mayor West.



Laying a wreath with Mayor West at the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery

Following this, Professor Emeritus of the University of Sydney, Dr Geoff Gallop AC (former Premier of Western Australia) delivered a speech, in which he emphasised how important it was that Australia and Japan had reached reconciliation after the war. The wreath laying was certainly a symbol of this reconciliation.

2. Cowra's Magnetism

After this, I once again visited the graves of Australian and Japanese soldiers in the Cowra War Cemetery. One of those thought to be a leader of the Cowra Breakout was MINAMI Tadao, whose story told in the book "The bugle for the charge at Cowra" left a strong impression on many readers. Naturally, I also visited his grave that day.

After his bomber crashed, he felt immense shame at being taken prisoner and kept his real name (TOYOSHIMA Hajime) a secret, instead using the last name "MINAMI" (meaning 'south') and first name "Tadao" (made up of the characters for 'loyal' and 'man'), symbolising his identity as 'the man who serves loyally in the southern hemisphere'. What a demonstration of his innermost thoughts! I think this will be something well understood by the generation who lived through the war.

When I visited Darwin in February this year and saw a history exhibit set up inside the Northern Territory Parliament House, I happened to see on display a uniform that has been worn by Mr. TOYOSHIMA when he was taken prisoner on Melville Island, about 100 km north from Darwin. Perhaps it was the power of this lingering image of his uniform, but I found myself looking for the grave of 'MINAMI Tadao'. That I was able to find his grave is thanks to the support of Cowra City, which ensures that the graveyard is neatly maintained.



Standing before the graves inscribed with the individual names of the soldiers who died, we reflected on the past

3. Duty, Honour, Country

Before dawn on 5 August 1944, 234 Japanese soldiers lost their lives after taking up knives, forks and even baseball bats and fearlessly exposing themselves to the camp guards' spray of machine-gun bullets. Their motives and feelings are still the subject of investigation by researchers. I believe that the suffering and internal conflict they likely felt cannot be adequately captured in one simple word like 'fanatic'.

Making my way to Cowra, surrounded by rolling hills, with the brilliant sun shining down and the town flush with green, I have the impression that this is the most blessed town in Australia. From the point of view of the soldiers interned here, were they greatly disturbed by thoughts of the disastrous state of their home country, exposed to bombing and the worsening war? And if so, would it be so strange to imagine that some of them would be plagued by the thought, "is it alright for me to be in this kind of place?"

In one of General MacArthur's famous speeches, he preaches the following attitude to young cadets: 'duty, honour, country'. Both Japanese and Australian soldiers at that time were certainly reflecting on duty and honour, and thinking very seriously about what they could do for their respective countries.



The view from the top of the hill in the Cowra Japanese Garden. What were those Japanese soldiers taken prisoner thinking about, on those far hills?

4. Those Brought Together by Cowra

Chair of the Board of the US Studies Centre in Sydney, with whom I have cultivated a close relationship since my appointment, Mr Mark Baillie, is an Aussie who spent his childhood in Cowra until the age of 18.

Therefore, during this year's Autumn Festival, I asked Mark and his wife Robyn to come to Cowra from Sydney, and I introduced them to those who always take care of me in Cowra – starting with Mayor West, and Chair of the Cowra Japanese Garden Board of Directors, Mr Bob Griffiths and his wife Maureen.

For a gathering such as this, the main dish could only be Cowra's specialty – lamb. Cowra has exquisite lamb, so much so that Chef Ogata, the chef at my residence in Canberra, who accompanied me, said that he had never eaten such delicious lamb in his life. This might be one more facet to Cowra's magnetism.

(My speech from the Autumn Festival reception hosted by the Mayor of Cowra is available [here](#).)



With Mr Baillie (second from left) and his wife (seventh from left), and Mr Griffiths (fourth from left) and his wife (on the very right) at the restaurant 'Quarry' which serves exquisite lamb

5. Ceremony to Commemorate the 80th Anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea

This might be obvious for those well-versed in war history, but the Battle of the Coral Sea was a naval battle fought between the Imperial Japanese Navy and United States and Australian forces in the Coral Sea, northeast of the Australian mainland. It was the first time in history that a naval battle unfolded between two mobile units based on aircraft carriers.

The result of this fierce battle was the combined loss of over 1600 sailors. This year's Commemoration Ceremony for the 80th Anniversary was attended from Australia by the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator Zed Seselja representing the Prime Minister and, from the United States, by Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of the United States Mr Mike Goldman, among others.

I made a speech which touched upon our three countries overcoming the fierce battles waged between us to achieve reconciliation after the war, and emphasised the importance of our close cooperation to address current security issues including the Ukraine crisis. (My speech is available [here](#).)



Wreathes at the memorial monument in Canberra

Under blue skies in the steadily cooling Canberra, while reflecting on how much ‘duty, honour, and country’ meant to the generation who fought in that war and the generations since who have cultivated and finally achieved post-war reconciliation, I laid a wreath, praying with all my heart for peace for the souls of those who died in the Battle of the Coral Sea, and for happiness for their bereaved families.

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