

## Remarks by H.E Ambassador YAMAGAMI Shingo to the Cowra Breakout 78<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Morning Tea Reception, Friday 5 August 2022

### 1. Introduction and Acknowledgements

- Mayor Bill West
  - Deputy Mayor Judi Smith
  - Mr Gordon Rolls
  - Mr Bob Griffiths
  - Mr Paul Devery
  - Members of the Cowra Breakout Association, Ladies and Gentlemen
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- I am honoured to join you this morning in this tranquil setting of the Cowra Japanese Gardens to say a few words concerning today's 78<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cowra Breakout.
  - Cowra is a place that has a special place in my heart. I have visited this idyllic central New South Wales town on seven occasions now, and every time I visit I am touched by the generosity in spirit and kindness shown by the townspeople and their representatives on the Cowra Council.
  - This consideration was most vividly expressed recently following the tragic death of former Prime Minister of Japan, the Honourable ABE Shinzo.
  - A citizen of this fine town laid flowers beneath a cherry tree donated by the late prime minister to the Sakura Avenue.
  - As Ambassador of Japan, I was deeply touched by this gesture, so illustrative of the consideration and friendship shown by the citizens of Cowra to Japan over so many decades.

### 2. The experience of Japan's prisoners of war

- That this closeness and degree of affection stems from another tragic incident remains a testament to the ability of humanity to find reconciliation and not to be bound to episodes from the past.
- It is often said that the past is a foreign country, distant in time and in values.
- When historians have sought to explain why the Japanese prisoners of war attempted to break out of the Cowra POW camp on that fateful morning of 5 August 1944, they often use words such as 'fanaticism' and 'group thinking' to find logic in what appears illogical.
- Yet after hearing from many of my father's generation, I am not so convinced that these were the reasons that those Japanese prisoners of war made their decision to attempt to escape.
- By 1944, Japan was facing a severe situation with a devastating defeat approaching; subject to daily air raids all over Japan and fighting on virtually all fronts. Its people were suffering calamitous food shortages, with malnutrition and starvation an ever-present problem.
- For those Japanese prisoners of war sent to Cowra, they must have been internally torn by the fact that they were receiving unexpectedly good treatment from their Australian captors while their families and children back home were suffering from the enormous horrors of the war.
- These prisoners of war, having expected to be humiliated for surrendering, instead found themselves treated humanely in such a peaceful environment.

- The dichotomy presented by this situation must have weighed heavily on the consciences of men raised to believe in duty, honour and country.
- These ideals are not unique to any one country, for they have inspired soldiers throughout history to endure the harshest of conditions in the belief that their hardship is suffered for the good of their country.
- The Japanese prisoners of war that faced the barbed wire fences of their POW camp on that cold August morning were no different.
- Knowing that their country was suffering and their families were anguishing, they knew they had to do something, anything, to return to protect it from harm.
- These prisoners of war well knew that their plan might fail, but they had to act. Their sense of duty to their country, and their own honour, demanded nothing less.

### **3. Parallels to the Attack on Sydney Harbour**

- A few months ago, I visited HMAS Kuttabul in Sydney in order to commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Midget Submarine Attack on Sydney Harbour.
- During the ceremony there, while paying tribute to the loss of precious lives on both sides, a senior member of the RAN remarked to me on how brave the Japanese sailors who climbed into those tiny submarines were, knowing that they may never return but whose sense of duty compelled them to carry out their mission.
- I suspect the Japanese prisoners of war in Cowra were motivated by the same ideals, although the circumstances were very different.
- The recognition of courage shown in spite of near impossible odds is a quality shared by humans worldwide.
- Our Australian friends know this well and have shared their thoughts about it with us on many occasions.
- The mutual admiration that Japan and Australia hold for one another has helped to bring us closer together, including our armed forces.
- The respect that the SDF and ADF have for each other has promoted our defence relationship to new heights, culminating in the signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement in January this year.
- For two nations once so utterly opposed to one another, the formation of this Agreement is not merely historic.
- It speaks to the power of reconciliation, of sharing a burden for a common good, and of the trust shared between the people of Japan and Australia.
- And it serves as a legacy for us, the descendants of the war generation – two nations, once divided, now united in friendship everlasting.
- Thank you.

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