

Remarks by HE YAMAGAMI Shingo
Ambassador of Japan to Australia
On the occasion of the Rotary District 9685 Conference
Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre
Sunday 19 March 2023

Ms Mina Howard, Governor of Rotary District 9685

Mr Bob Griffiths, my friend, President of the Cowra Rotary Club and former Chair of the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre

Rotarians

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to join you this morning in the tranquil setting of the Cowra Japanese Garden to speak about Japan's connection with Cowra.

I understand many of you have travelled from parts of Sydney, the Blue Mountains, and the Central Coast to be here this weekend.

Since my arrival as the Japanese Ambassador to Australia in December 2020, I have visited this idyllic country town on eight occasions

And today marks my ninth.

For context, the only other place in Australia I have visited more than Cowra is Sydney. I have been to Cowra more than I have Melbourne!

Nothing against Melbourne and Melburnians, of course.

Their coffee is the best in the world.

But given many of you are from Sydney, I imagine you are happy to hear this!

As you can tell, Cowra holds a special place in my heart.

Many of my predecessors at the Embassy of Japan have commented on the importance of Cowra in the bilateral relationship between our two countries.

But it can be perfectly summed up in the words of former Japanese ambassador, HATAKENAKA Atsushi who said;

“Cowra is the spiritual home of Japan-Australia relations.”

So I knew the very first place I had to visit in Australia was Cowra.

And so I did.

I visited Cowra even before presenting my credentials to the Governor-General!

I have joked it might be easier to just set up an official residence here considering how often I visit.

With property prices coming down, now might be my chance!

With each visit, I am reminded of the generosity of spirit and kindness shown by the people of this wonderful community.

Characteristics of which I have come to learn as typically Australian.

Historically, Cowra represents a tragic time in both Japanese and Australian history.

But today it is a symbol of peace, reconciliation, and mutual understanding.

A place where mutual respect was born in the shadow of tragedy.

Japan and Australia have gone from being on opposing sides to the same side.

And today, we can say we are great mates.

Perhaps even greater than your mates across the Tasman!

The reason Cowra continues to be talked about by those involved in Japan-Australia relations over the years is because it was the scene of the largest escape attempt by prisoners of war in modern history.

Just over 78 years ago, in the early morning darkness of the 5th of August 1944, a group of Japanese prisoners of war held at the POW camp in Cowra attempted to escape.

In the ensuing firefight, 234 Japanese prisoners of war and 4 Australian soldiers were killed.

It was said those 300 or more Japanese soldiers that did manage to escape were recaptured over the following week, and not one successfully managed to get away.

A number of publications have been written about this incident.

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.

The degree of closeness and affection stemming from the Cowra Breakout remains a testament to the ability of humanity to find reconciliation and not to be bound by episodes of the past.

It is often said that the past is a foreign country.

Distant in time and in values.

Historians have sought to explain why the Japanese POWs attempted to break out of the Cowra POW camp on that fateful morning in August 1944.

Often using rods such as 'fanaticism' and 'group thinking' to find logic in what appears to be illogical.

Yet after hearing from my father's generation, I am not so convinced that these were the reasons that those Japanese POWs made their decision to attempt to escape.

By 1944, Japan was facing a seere situation with devastating defeat approaching; subject to daily air raids all over Japan and fighting virtually on all fronts.

Its people were suffering calamitous food shortages, with malnutrition and starvation an ever-present problem.

For those Japanese POWs sent to Cowra, they must have been internally torn by the fact that they were receiving unexpectedly good treatment from their Australian captors.

All the while, their families and children back home were suffering from the enormous horrors of war.

These POWs, 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 weighted heavily on the hearts and minds 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.

One can assume that the Japanese POWs who 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 try to return to protect them from harm.

These POWs knew all too well that their plan might fail.

But they had to act.

Their sense of duty to their country, and their own honour, demanded nothing less.

The mutual respect and understanding that comes from Cowra has helped to bring our two countries together in more ways than one.

Japan and Australia's relationship has long been defined by its time-tested mutual economic complementarity.

And even today, this relationship is one that continues to reach stratospheric heights.

To give you a picture of just how important this economic partnership is, allow me to share my 'magic number' with you; 764-942.

No, this is not my PIN number. I wouldn't give that out so easily unless it's my wife asking!

Among Japan's imports, 70% of coal, 60% of iron ore, 40% of gas, 90% of sugar, 40% of beef, and 20% of wheat come from this country, Australia.

As you can see, Japan is staggeringly reliant on Australia for its energy and food security.

For even greater context, without Australia's reliable supply of energy, the neon lights of Tokyo's world-famous streets would go dark!

New frontiers of cooperation are emerging between our two countries; including hydrogen, infrastructure, and even space.

In terms of security, the respect the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the Australian Defence Force hold for one another has helped bring us closer together.

This has culminated in the upgrading of our security partnership with the signing of the Reciprocal Access Agreement and the landmark Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.

The formation of these are 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.

Cowra's legacy forms the very foundation of our two countries' relationship.

And this lasting legacy continues to be supported by Cowra Mayor, Councillor Bill West and the wider Cowra community in so many ways.

Today, we are here at the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre.

I can tell you that it is the best Japanese garden outside of Japan!

Don't tell this to my American or British friends.

The way the sense of peace and serenity of this garden envelopes you is undeniable.

And the Japanese War Cemetery continues to be dutifully and beautifully maintained by the Cowra City Council and related stakeholders.

As a Japanese, I am profoundly moved.

Cowra is home to the World Peace Bell, awarded for its commitment to world peace.

The Cowra community celebrates its connection with Japan with the annual Sakura Matsuri Cherry Blossom Festival and its sister event, the Koyo Matsuri Autumn Festival.

And for 53 years, the Cowra-Seikei Student Exchange – quite possibly the longest continuing student exchange between Japan and Australia – has brought together younger generations ensuring this legacy of Cowra is not forgotten.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer my sincerest gratitude to Mr Bob Griffith for continuing his unwavering support for this exchange program.

Even for the youngest of the next generation, the story of Cowra lives on.

On a previous visit, I was gifted a children's book by local author, Lusi Austin.

Jack's Visit to Cowra tells the story of a young boy called Jack who comes to visit his grandparents.

Jack's grandfather shares a story of discovering a Japanese man hiding in the chook house as a kid.

He then tells young Jack about the Cowra Breakout, saying that despite the tragedy that happened here, some good things came from it.

Adding, Japan and Australia became good friends "because of the kindness that happened in Cowra".

We share the responsibility to ensure the legacy of Cowra continues to thrive and more importantly, is passed on to future generations, both here in Australia and in Japan.

The more I visit, the more enamoured I am of this place.

It is truly the most blessed town in Australia!

Thank you.