

Speech by His Excellency Ambassador SUZUKI Kazuhiro on the occasion of the Cowra Breakout 79th Anniversary Commemoration Ceremony 5 August 2023

Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley, Governor of New South Wales, and Mr Dennis Wilson

Councillor Bill West, Mayor of Cowra and Acting Chairman of the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre,

Mr Gordon Rolls, President of the Cowra Breakout Association,

Mr Michiaki Uriu, Chairperson of Fukuoka Australia Japan Society,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for that kind introduction. My appearance before you this morning marks my second visit to Cowra in the space of three months.

At the outset, I would just like to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, the Wiradjuri nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Ladies and gentlemen, that I am here once more amid these rolling canola plains of central New South Wales, in a tranquil setting made more idyllic by the fine citizens of this regional city, is because Cowra represents something ennobling about the human spirit.

In the cold dark of the morning of 5 August 1944, 1,104 Japanese Prisoners of War, brought to the camp here from across Australia and the wider Pacific, attempted to escape *en masse* despite the near impossibility of success.

Their reasons were many, their motivations equally diverse. Raised in a society that venerated the soldier as an instrument of divinity, the idea of capture was intolerable and being made a prisoner unforgivable.

In the violence that followed, 231 Japanese and 4 Australian soldiers tragically died.

The incident was illustrative of the mores of the time. Two societies, almost entirely alien to one another and driven by disparate ideologies, had clashed in a mortal struggle amid the chilled air of Cowra that Saturday morning.

In the aftermath, none could have realized what this incident would inspire.

The citizens of Cowra, after seeing the grass of the Japanese cemetery grow longer with the passing of the years, began to tend to the graves.

There are few instances in the long history of human conflict where the spirit of generosity prevails.

In May last year, as Japanese Ambassador to Turkey, I saw that spirit made manifest in the allied cemeteries adorning the cliffs at Gallipoli.

I see it again in the Japanese and Commonwealth cemetery in this quiet part of New South Wales, amid the calls of magpies, currawongs and corellas.

22 years ago my predecessor Ambassador Hatakenaka called Cowra 'the spiritual home of Australia-Japan relationships'. It is most certainly that.

In the years since the Japanese Garden has become one of the most visited attractions in Australia, and the Japanese Cultural Centre has introduced the intricacies and colour of Japan and its people to generations of visitors.

Cowra has, in a myriad of ways, become the spiritual and temporal home of Australia-Japan relations.

The Kōyō and Sakura Matsuri celebrated here, the ties forged over decades between the people of Cowra and Japan, the kindness and thoughtfulness shown here towards Japan, have brought us closer together like never before.

A relationship born from tragedy is always tinged with a degree of sorrow, but it need not be forever bound to melancholy.

Cowra has provided the light to illuminate the path to reconciliation, and we and generations to come have been made all the better for it.

From our economic relationship to the growing security relationship we have embraced in recent years, Japan and Australia have sought to consult and assist one another in an ever-changing and challenging global environment.

We stand in solidarity with our fellow democracies in defence of the rule of law and upholding human rights.

Proof of just how our relationship has evolved is all around us, yet all of this may never have come to pass were it not for Cowra.

When the petals from Cowra Sakura trees are blown on the wind, they come to rest on the wattle and eucalypts that distinguish this rural landscape.

Hues of pink interspersed with yellow and green, distinct yet complimentary, heralding the start of new life, new ties, and a promise of what is to come.

It best represents what Cowra means to us all, and may it forever be so.

Thank you.

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