

**Oration Speech by His Excellency Ambassador SUZUKI Kazuhiro  
at the Cowra Kōyō Matsuri Mayoral Reception – 2 May 2025**

Mayor Paul Smith,  
Honourable members of the Cowra Council,  
Mr Bill West,  
Esteemed members of the Board of the Cowra Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre,  
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

It is a pleasure to be in Cowra again, amid the brilliant hues of red and yellow leaves that colour the landscape, to celebrate with you all this year's Kōyō Matsuri.

The festival brings together so many of the attractions of Japan, and in all honesty brings out quite a few feelings of nostalgia in me.

In Cowra you have so many open spaces with which you can sit with friends and family and enjoy the scenery, whereas in Tokyo you often have to send a friend or family member ahead to reserve a spot just to sit down.

So in that sense the Cowra Kōyō Matsuri offers the best of both worlds – Japanese tradition and culture, combined with Australian hospitality and spaciousness.

Last year saw the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cowra Breakout, and I, along with other Japanese government and private individuals, attended a series of events, including laying wreaths at the Australian War Cemetery and Japanese War Cemetery with Prime Minister Albanese.

Following the ceremonies at the cemetery, attendees moved to the Japanese Garden, where they learned about the extraordinary actions of Mrs May Weir.

It was Mrs Weir who provided tea and scones to escaped Japanese prisoners of war as

they waited to be recaptured. It was an incredible act of kindness in the midst of a chaotic situation, and so generous in spirit that it will never be forgotten.

It is with this event in mind that I wanted to share with you all something of a personal story. Some of the details you may already know, however others I am revealing for the first time in public today.

As this year marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, these reflections will contribute to remembering the difficulties that people faced at that time.

My father, Harunobu, who was from Tochigi Prefecture, passed an exam to enter the prestigious Imperial Japanese Army Academy just before the start of the War in the Pacific.

As he had received a good education and performed well at the Academy, he was selected to join as a trainee pilot with the rank of lieutenant in an Army Air-Force squadron and he flew the Nakajima Hayabusa aircraft in exercises.

As the war situation worsened, a part of the 57<sup>th</sup> graduating class of the Army Academy, which included my father, was selected to join the *Tokkōtai*, a special unit of the Japanese Army Air-Force, in Miyakonojyo, Kyushu.

Japanese youth selected for the *Tokkōtai* as pilots knew that their lives would be short. They received very harsh training from their instructors.

There was a saying at the time, which went “A week consists of Monday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Friday”. Weekends didn’t exist, you just worked all the time, which in hindsight probably wasn’t great for the war effort.

So young pilots underwent this training so that they would, according to the ethos at the time, perform their duty diligently in the service of their nation.

Chiran and Kanoya naval bases were historically famous ones for *Tokkōtai*, but the army also had their own bases in Kyushu. My father was eventually sent to the Miyakonojyo base in Miyazaki Prefecture to complete his training as a *Tokkōtai* squadron leader.

It was while he was taking part in training one day that his aircraft suddenly caught fire.

Through sheer luck, the ground crew managed to pull my father out of the aircraft but he was very badly burned around his head and upper body.

Many, many years later, as a toddler I would sometimes share a bath with my father, as this is quite customary in Japan.

Even today I still remember seeing my father's ears fused to his scalp, and the burn scars all over his torso, chest, back, and arms. I thought that all adults looked like this, and so didn't pay it much attention.

It was only later, after seeing the appearances of other adults, that I started to wonder why my father's ears and upper body were the way they were.

My father's hair was long enough to hide his ears and he would wear long sleeves even on the hottest of summer days.

My father's injuries were so bad that he wasn't expected to survive. He was transferred to the base hospital in Miyakonojyo and put under observation. He was literally at death's door, unconscious and fighting for his very life.

It was in this condition that he remained when the war suddenly came to an end on 15 August 1945. According to the Memorial Stone to the *Tokkōtai* in Miyakonojyo, from 6 April to 1 July 1945, 79 young pilots died over the Pacific.

My father was supposed to be the 80<sup>th</sup>.

Many of these young pilots were classmates from my father's 57<sup>th</sup> graduating class of the Army Academy.

But he remained in hospital for a few further months before he was judged well enough to be discharged and then demobilized.

Like many other veterans, he suddenly found himself thrust back into civilian life, and so made his way to Hokkaido as a friend of his lived there and helped to take care of him as

he recovered from his injuries.

Two of my father's elder brothers had also died in the war, one as a Navy crew member off the coast of The Philippines, and the other with the Army in Imphal (or Burma) during a forced march.

So my father returned to his hometown of Utsunomiya in Tochigi Prefecture, alive while so many other young men of the town had died.

There were no support networks available for demobilized Japanese veterans in those days, and so to make ends meet my father started teaching mathematics lessons at a local junior high school while studying law at night.

After sitting for the bar qualification exam to become a lawyer, he finally passed it on his third attempt.

My father, throughout his life, would carry an enormous sense of guilt about the fact that he had survived the war, albeit badly injured, while so many of his fellow classmates and squadron colleagues had died.

In his mind he had to atone for this, and so decided that he would become a public defender, often working *pro bono* for clients who couldn't afford legal fees.

This meant that my household was not a wealthy one, although the area in which my apartment was located was quite wealthy.

When I was around 8 or 9 years old, so around the time of Year 2 in Elementary School, I remember being teased by other students about the fact that we couldn't have a study desk.

I felt embarrassed by this, even though my father had declared that he didn't become a lawyer to grow rich and so the family too had to accept this.

One Sunday afternoon, my father asked if I wanted to go for a walk with him, and so I accompanied him.

On the way, while walking together, I started to criticize him, saying “Papa, you said you were a great lawyer. But if you can’t give me a room and a desk to study at, you ain’t no great lawyer.” Then I started to cry.

After returning home, my father told my mother about what I had said, and told her “I have to do something about this”. So he made a resolution to move out of public defending to become an independent contractor lawyer. One of his major clients was a renowned golf club in Tochigi Prefecture. And so for the next 2 to 3 years he worked like hell.

When I was in Year 4 or 5 of Elementary School, my father had enough savings to buy some nearby land and build a new house for the family to live in.

Many years later my mother told me that my father had been quite shocked after hearing his son say such things, but then she said to me “well done Kazuhiro, you did a great job!”.

Throughout all this, my father continued to be haunted by his war memories. I still remember when he would get a bit drunk he would take me for a walk, and together we would occasionally shout out ‘*sensō hantai!*’, or ‘no war!’.

When his work schedule permitted it, my father attended memorial events almost every year, travelling to Chiran and Miyakonojyo in Kyushu by train.

I once asked him “why the hell do you waste your time travelling by train instead of by airplane?” He replied by saying “these journeys are pilgrimages for me. And whoever heard of a flying pilgrim?!”. And that was the end of the matter.

In his later years, my father once travelled to Okinawa. He went to the coast there and got on a boat, and then travelled out to the place where his classmates had died. He then cast a wreath into the ocean and said a prayer in their memory.

As he regarded these acts as pilgrimages, he continued to perform them for as long as he physically could.

When I eventually entered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, my father was very proud,

particularly after he found out that I was working on security cooperation together with US counterparts.

Here was his son working together with a former foe for the protection of both countries.

Although my father did not live to see me take up my position as Ambassador to Australia, I am convinced that he would be equally if not more proud of his son.

My father's story was one of many, unique in itself but also similar to those of other Japanese veterans.

Another such individual was NAGAKURA Saburo, who created the Nagakura Foundation that oversaw the creation of Saburo Nagakura Park here in Cowra.

It was after a visit here to Cowra in 1978, when he had seen how the people here had tended to the graves of both Australian and Japanese soldiers, that NAGAKURA Saburo resolved to do something to thank Cowra for its kindness and to atone for what had happened during the war.

The generosity of the human spirit found in Cowra has many similarities to another war memorial involving Australians half a world away.

After many years spent in service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I would eventually find myself appointed as Ambassador to Türkiye. It was while I was there that I got to know the honorary Australian Consul-General in the town of Gallipoli.

He is a Turkish citizen, and he was kind enough to take me on a tour of the war cemeteries overlooking Anzac Cove. What struck me most was the fact that the Turkish government was maintaining the graves of Turkish and allied soldiers alike.

When I went to the cemeteries at Anzac Cove, I noticed that the Australians and New Zealanders visiting the cemeteries also went to look at the Turkish graves. I was very impressed by such displays of respect to a former foe.

I also learned from the honorary Consul-General about the role of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Türkiye and commander in chief of

Ottoman forces at Gallipoli, and his role in ensuring that the graves of all the combatants who died during the brutal Gallipoli campaign would be well maintained.

In famous words attributed to Atatürk, he wrote “You, the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears. Your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.”

My reason for quoting Atatürk stems from my belief that the sentiment that he expressed has also been made manifest here in Cowra.

The gratitude that Japan has for generations of Cowra residents who have tenderly cared for the Australian War Cemetery and Japanese War Cemetery is boundless and everlasting.

This can be seen in the dedications of cherry blossom trees and messages by successive Japanese prime ministers and foreign ministers out near the former POW camp ground.

Prime Minister ISHIBA himself has a deep interest in what has taken place here in Cowra, and has expressed his sincere appreciation for all that Cowra does both in memory of the Breakout and to foster Japan-Australia ties.

For myself, I feel enormously privileged to be able to represent Japan during events like this. And I am sure that my father would also be very happy to see his son playing his part in forging closer ties with Australia.

Today, our defence and security relationship has grown to the point that we are now allies in all but name.

In 2024, the Australian Defence Force and Japan Self-Defense Forces participated in a total of 39 bilateral and multilateral exercises together, meaning that they were engaged in exercises together 1 in every 9 days somewhere in the world.

The quality of the exercises is also very high, as we are already conducting joint exercises with our F-35s along with our amphibious forces.

In terms of our bilateral economic relationship, a new Japan-Australia bilateral investment report indicates that Japanese foreign direct investment in Australia hit another record, reaching \$141 billion AUD in 2024. Japan also remains the only foreign investor to have increased its FDI to Australia in every single year for the past 11 years.

It's a reflection of just how close our bilateral relationship is, and how it continues to go from strength to strength.

Just last year, the size of the Japanese expat community in Australia surpassed that of the Japanese expat community in China to become the second largest in the world.

There are Japanese people involved in all sorts of roles all across Australia, helping to build our people-to-people ties.

This year we are hosting the World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, and I know that Australia has its pavilion up and running.

So putting on my tourism promotion hat, I'd like to encourage you all to make your way north to enjoy both the Expo and a bit of sightseeing.

With your help, we'll be able to break through the million visitors' mark from Australia to Japan.

Likewise, this year I hope that more visitors will make their way to Cowra to enjoy the tremendous atmosphere of friendship and curiosity that the Kōyō Matsuri fosters in all of the participants.

Many of those are here to help make this year's Kōyō Matsuri an even bigger event, and so I want to take a moment to acknowledge all of the hard work of everyone involved in making the Kōyō Matsuri such a big success.

In a world which is becoming ever more gloomy, with the situation in the Middle East and Ukraine, the example of Cowra should be one transmitted to the world to show what can be achieved through reconciliation.

Every year, memorial ceremonies like that here in Cowra take place in other places across



Australia such as HMAS Kuttabul and Darwin, both of which I have attended. The act of acknowledging the loss of life coincides with messages of respect for former foes. They are ceremonies steeped in deep meaning and are profoundly significant.

With the passage of the years, more of those who were first-hand witnesses to what occurred during the Second World War pass away and the memories of that conflict grow fainter.

Through its diligence and its commitment to preserving the historical memory of a tragic event that took place 81 years ago, Cowra ensures that the lessons of the Breakout are conveyed to future generations so that they too can see what genuine reconciliation can achieve.

It is the most noble of endeavours, and deserves to be as widely known as possible.

This is a mission that I, as Ambassador of Japan, feel most obliged to fulfill, and I hope that generation after generation of the citizens of Cowra will continue to promote the message of reconciliation that this town represents.

It is incredible to think of the many Cowra mayors who have passed the tradition of tolerance and understanding from one generation to the next. It is an extraordinary historical achievement, and why Japan is so indebted to Cowra and its people.

And I am not the only one to think so. Proof of this lies in the words of former ambassador Hatakenaka when he called Cowra the “spiritual home of Japan-Australia relations”.

Generations of ambassadors that have followed have sought to emphasise this belief, and I am honoured to be included among them.

In a world beset by strife and conflict, the cooperation of the Embassy with generations of the people of Cowra shows humanity that it is possible to create a silver lining to this thing called life.

So in this living symbol of the strong bond between Japan and Australia, I feel greatly honoured to have been given the opportunity to tell my story here, and so I join you in

celebrating our tried and true friendship.

Thank you.

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