

Cowra prison break: The biggest, bloodiest prison breakout in WWII

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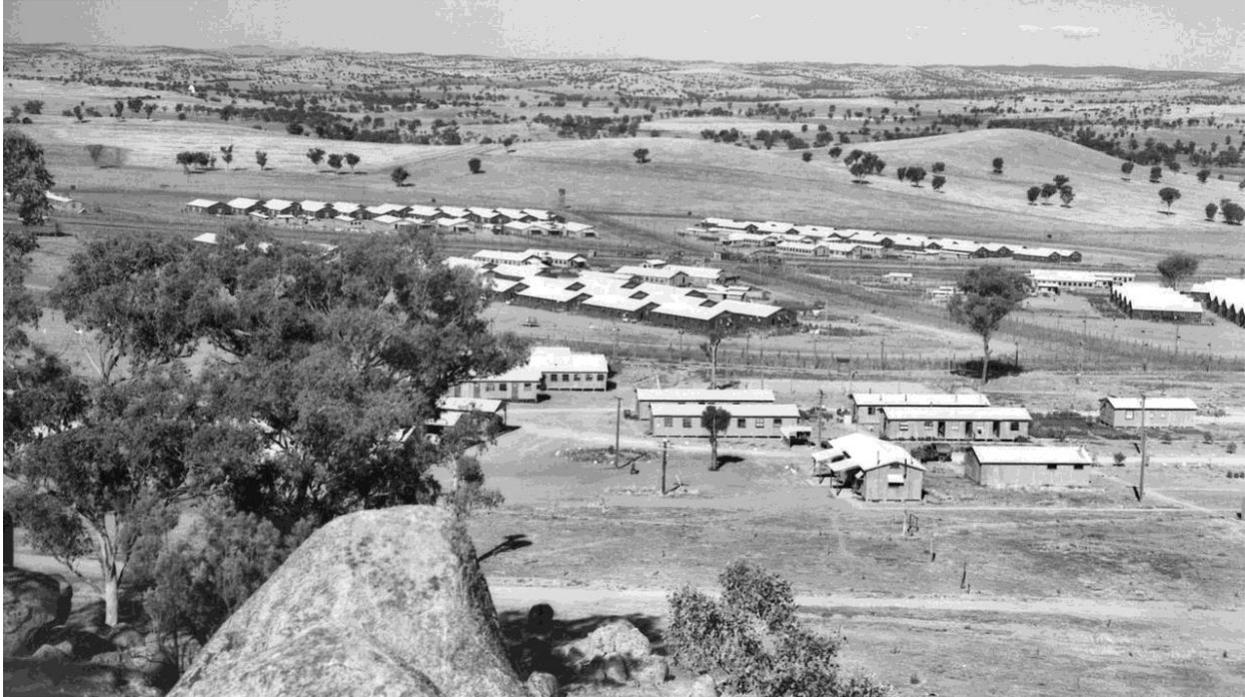
Close to 2am on a cold moonlit night on August 5, 1944, more than 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war overpowered their Australian guards and escaped from a prison camp in the NSW central west town, Cowra.

Nearly 400 men made it out while 231 others were killed in the following days. But, what many don't realise is that the Japanese were not escaping because they wanted freedom.

They escaped because they wanted to keep fighting.

For them, being captured was a shame greater than death. These men felt they were like "ghosts" because, in captivity, they couldn't be warriors and if they returned home, they'd be shunned by families and communities, so great was the shame in being a prisoner.

It was 75 years ago this week that Cowra, a town in the "middle of nowhere" became a battlefield. It's a snapshot of history that will always be known as the infamous "Cowra breakout."



The POW camp in Cowra. This August marks 75 years since the breakout. Picture: AAP/Australian War Memorial.

THE PRISON CAMP

In 1941, Australia's 6th, 7th, and 9th Divisions joined Allied operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa which resulted in the [capture of tens of thousands of Italians](#).

Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, Australia had to find somewhere to keep the men, so the Australian government decided Cowra was the ideal place.

Why Cowra?

It had a road connection to Sydney and, most importantly, it was isolated. That was the psychological element: if prisoners realise they're in the "middle of nowhere" then they won't try to escape. It was also an ideal location for the POWs because there was already an established army training camp in Cowra, next door to the prison camp.

But, in 1942, as the camp was getting bigger as more prisoners arrived, Australia started taking Japanese POWs — even though the camp was only intended to be used by the Italians.

By the time of the tragic prison breakout, there were already 1,100 Japanese in the camp and many were close to breaking point.



Japanese prisoners attending the camp clothing parade. These photographs were taken for the Far Eastern Liaison Office as a basis for propaganda leaflets to be dropped over Japanese-held islands and the Japanese mainland. Picture: Supplied.

WHO WERE THE JAPANESE PRISONERS?

According to [historian Mat McLachlan](#), most of the Japanese were infantrymen who had been captured in New Guinea, who were wounded or ill when captured so they couldn't resist. There were also several sailors, as well as aviators from the Japanese army and navy.

McLachlan told news.com.au the airmen tended to be the most “fanatical” of them all.

“They were better educated and higher in rank than the lowly private. They were also very heavily fanatical about the idea of dying for the emperor,” he said.

“The soldiers who had been sleeping in the mud with leeches and starving in the jungle, trying to stay alive, tended to be less fanatical because I believe they were more philosophical and pragmatic about the concept of dying for the great war.

“But, at the time of the Cowra breakout, the real trouble was caused by the Japanese airmen,” McLachlan said.



A survivor of the Cowra breakout, circa 1944-1946. Picture: Supplied.

It's been said that, for the Japanese, there was a great sense of shame in being a POW. But McLachlan claims the truth is much deeper than that.

“When Japanese men were conscripted to fight, it was considered they were going away to die a great noble death. In Japan, when they said goodbye to their families and communities, they'd have a huge send-off parade, with flags and banners, so there was a feeling that they were sacrificing their lives for Japan and the concept of capture wasn't part of the plan,” McLachlan said.

“But not all the Japanese were fanatics. Plenty of them, when they knew they were caught, would surrender. But the issue was that many were captured when they were wounded or sick and they had no choice.”

“Japan had said that no soldier will ever surrender. So, if a man is missing in battle, the official word back home is that he must have been killed and families were notified. So the captured Japanese men are in a difficult position where they'd once been great warriors but are now in a prison camp doing manual jobs. So they referred to themselves as 'ghosts'. Their families think they're dead and they'd be shunned if they returned home.”



The burial of Japanese Prisoners of War who lost their lives in the mass breakout in Cowra. Picture: AAP/Australian War Memorial.

ITALIAN PRISONERS & JAPANESE PRISONERS

It was a different story for the [Italian POWs in Cowra](#) who, according to McLachlan, enjoyed being out of the war and looked forward to going back to Italy. Seen as model prisoners, the Italians were allowed to work at local farms before returning to the prison camp at the end of the day.

“The Italians were harmless and docile. There are lots of stories about Italians hooking up with farmers wives! One of my favourite stories is about some Italian prisoners who went out to the farms one day then headed back to camp but got a flat tyre and by the time they got back to camp it was locked so they had to bang on the gates to be let back in!” McLachlan said.

“In comparison, the Japanese were dangerous, broody, difficult prisoners and not put on work detail. Imagine what it means to you as a person when you see yourself as a ‘ghost.’ Many believed they should have died in battle. Instead they were stuck in a prison camp. So, it wasn’t long before they had an idea that they had to do something drastic.”



Italian POW's grading tomatoes at camp kitchen at Yanco, NSW. Picture: *Migrants or Mates ... Italian life in Australia.*

THE REASONS BEHIND THE BREAKOUT

According to McLachlan the major misconception about the Cowra breakout is that it was about freedom. But the desire by the Japanese to escape was all about continuing to battle.

“The Japanese wanted to fight again. They felt that they were warriors who were not fighting, they felt they brought great shame to Japan and they wanted to fight and hopefully die fighting,” McLachlan said.

As the war dragged on, word reached Australia that Japanese POWs in New Zealand had rioted. According to McLachlan, this should have sounded very loud warning bells at Cowra.

“Then, a Korean POW who could speak Japanese told the Australians he’d overheard Japanese plans to take over the camp. The Australians knew it was likely the Japanese were planning something dangerous, so they made a decision to split the Japanese up and send all the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to a camp at Hay.”

Then, according to McLachlan, they made a fatal mistake.

“On the morning of Friday August 4, they told the Japanese they’d be sending the NCOs to Hay on the Monday. They were just being nice, allowing the men to say goodbye to their friends. But they shouldn’t have given the men two days warning. What they should have done was tell the men on the Monday and leave immediately.”

“They knew there was a riot in New Zealand, they had an informant warning them something will happen, they had all these signs and the Australians should have been able to intervene. Also, the Japanese had been hoarding weapons, but the Australians weren’t doing adequate searches of the camp.

“It was very poor on the part of the Australians and the Cowra breakout should never have happened.”



Japanese prisoners who attempted to escape from Cowra. Picture: Supplied.

THE BREAKOUT

It was Friday night when the Japanese went into their huts and decided democratically to break out of the prison.

According to McLachlan, each man got a square of toilet paper and wrote either a cross or a circle (a circle meant “break out” and a cross meant “don’t break out.”) The majority voted with a circle.

“The plan was that, at 2am, one of the prisoners would blow a bugle to signal the start of the breakout. But it actually started at 1:50am because one of the Japanese prisoners lost his nerve and went running up to the guards to let them know it was about to happen. And so they blew the bugle, the Japanese came swarming out of their huts, and set fire to their huts,” McLachlan said.

“They wanted to take over the camp and get hold of the two machine guns that were guarding the camp. One group of men ran to the centre of the camp known as ‘Broadway’ to open up the camp and let other prisoners out. There were four compounds in the camp and only one compound was involved in the breakout. The plan was to open the gates while another group went to climb the fence to provide support from outside the camp. Others charged at the machine guns and that’s when the majority of casualties occurred. The group that climbed over the fence mostly survived as there was just one Australian there with a gun who couldn’t do much to stop hundreds of Japanese.”



A collection of knives recovered in and around B Camp at Cowra after the mass escape attempt. Picture: Supplied.

“Two Australian guards ran out in their pyjamas — it was literally a race to the guns. They managed to get the guns in action first and fired at the Japanese, killing more than 100. Two Australian guards were stabbed to death by the Japanese. The guards disabled the machine guns so the Japanese weren’t able to turn the guns on the other Aussie guards. The Japanese plan was to launch a big attack on the army base next door and kill as many Aussies as they could but once the machine gun was put out of action, the Japanese just ran out of the camp and took off into the bush.”

THE AFTERMATH

It took nine days to round up the surviving Japanese prisoners and bring them back to camp. According to McLachlan, they were said to be fairly calm.

“They’d done all they could do. The fight was out of them and they were sent to the prison camp in Hay. There were 231 Japanese men killed by gunfire and suicide, as well as other bodies found in the huts but it’s not known if they had been killed by their comrades or by suicide,” McLachlan said.



A soldier stands with a local next to a rope that one Japanese POW used to hang himself. His boots still sit on blocks of wood he stood on. Picture: Supplied.

“The official death toll of the Australians is four but, during my research, I’ve discovered a fifth man who should be included. His name was Thomas Hancock from the Volunteer Defence Corps. The volunteers were usually older men who’d fought in WWI who had been asked to help guard the train lines. Hancock was accidentally shot by another volunteer and he died of his wounds.”

“He’s never counted and I think that’s a terrible oversight. He’s buried in the Blaney cemetery with a military headstone and yet his name is not on the roll of honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. He was part of the military and he’s not counted as one of the men killed during the Cowra breakout, just because he wasn’t killed by the Japanese.”

“I’ve been petitioning the war memorial to put his name on the roll of honour and I hope they will eventually do that for his family.”



Japanese POW Marekumi Takahara (L) with one of his Australian guards Walter McKenzie on the 60th anniversary of the Cowra breakout, back in 2004. Picture: Sam/Ruttyn.

McLachlan is adamant that the Cowra breakout should never have happened, given that the Australians had fair warning; they knew what had happened in New Zealand and had had an informant telling them plans were underway.

“It was a massive failure of intelligence and process and subsequently covered up. The breakout should never have happened and errors and oversights from the Australians contributed significantly to the death toll.”

Historian Mat McLachlan also hosts a [history podcast](#) where you can get further information about the Cowra breakout.