

Monday 5 August 2019 marks the 75th anniversary of the breakout of approximately 545 Japanese prisoners from No. 12 Prisoner of War Compound - known as the Cowra breakout.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

064284

Looking west showing the compounds of the 12th Australian Prisoner of War Camp at Cowra, with the Group Headquarter buildings in the foreground.

By August 1944 there were 2,223 Japanese prisoners of war in Australia, including 544 merchant seamen. Of these 1,104 were housed in Camp B of No. 12 Prisoner of War Compound near Cowra, in the central west of New South Wales. They were guarded by the 22nd Garrison Battalion.

On Friday 4 August, in response to information that the Japanese were discussing a mass outbreak, notice was given that all Japanese prisoners below the rank of Lance Corporal would be transferred to the Hay Prisoner of War Camp. About 2 am on Saturday 5 August 1944 a prisoner ran shouting to the camp gates. Soon afterwards an unauthorised bugle was heard and prisoners, armed with knives and improvised clubs, rushed from their huts and began breaking through the wire fences. Sentries opened fire but several hundred prisoners escaped into open country, while others who remained set fire to the camp buildings.

Approximately 545 Japanese attempted escape. In the following nine days 334 prisoners were retaken. In all, 234 Japanese were killed or committed suicide and 108 wounded.

Australian casualties

On the night of the breakout three Australian soldiers were killed and another three were wounded. Privates B.G. Hardy and R. Jones, who were overwhelmed while manning a machine gun post, were posthumously awarded the George Cross.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

044119

Burial of Australian soldiers killed during breakout of Japanese prisoners at camp 12B, Cowra prison of war and internment group compound, 05-08-1944.

Closing the camp

The Cowra camp remained open until 1947 when the last of its prisoners and internees were repatriated. The camp was then dismantled, many of the buildings re-used elsewhere at government facilities and the barbed wire and fencing sold off to local farmers.