



THE MASS ESCAPE FROM COWRA

On Saturday, August 5, 1944 there occurred the largest escape ever in the history of the British Empire. It happened in a small New South Wales country town which borders on the Lachlan River, 227 miles southwest of Sydney, Australia. This small town's name is Cowra — the word being derived from the aboriginal word meaning 'the rocks', which is probably connected with the amount of rocky granite outcrops that occur throughout the town and the nearby hillsides.

In 1941 the Australian Army decided to create a prisoner-of-war camp at Cowra which was designated PoW Camp No. 12. The camp was divided into four, seventeen-acre camps each designed to hold approximately 1,000 prisoners of war. The camp was

divided through the centre by what was known as the Broadway. This consisted of a strip 50 yards wide and 750 yards long which separated Camps B and C on the eastern side and Camps A and D which lay to the west. Camps A and B were separated from Camps C and D in the south by an area of no man's land 10 yards wide and approximately 350 yards long, fenced with barbed wire on both sides.

The entrance into the camp was at the southern end of the Broadway, and was guarded by two watch towers and two sentry boxes. This was the only way in or out of all four camps. Around the edge of each camp was a perimeter fence consisting of three separate barbed wire fences approximately 30 feet apart with the spaces in between filled

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with densely tangled barbed wire mesh approximately 4 to 6 feet high.

The responsibility for guarding the camp was entrusted to the 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion which consisted mainly of those too old for active service, many of whom had seen service in the First World War. Others were younger men who had some form of disability which restricted them from service overseas.

The first prisoners to arrive were Italians captured in the Middle East. The Italians and large were fairly happy to be PoWs and the co-operation between them and the guards led to a fairly relaxed and easy-going



Initially the various camps constructed in Australia — at Graythorne, Queensland; Hay and Liverpool in New South Wales; Loveday in South Australia, and Tatura, Murchison and Myrtleford in Victoria — were used to intern Italian, German and Japanese civilians. Later, captured servicemen boosted the

numbers. Camp No. 12 was built at Cowra, west of Sydney, in 1941. The picture *top* of the Japanese B Compound was taken on July 1, 1944 — just a month before the break out. *Above*: Another of our Australian readers, Darrel Cunningham, explores the remains of the camp, only the brick foundations remain.

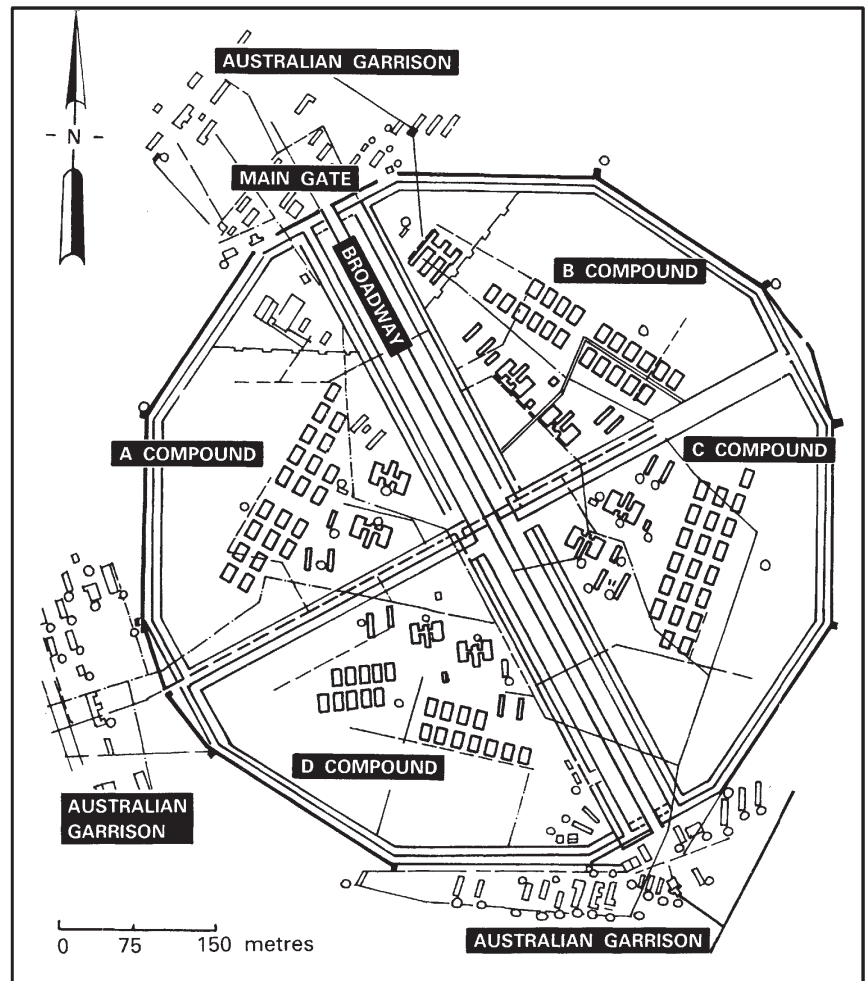


atmosphere. The Italians were quite prepared to sit out the war working on the nearby farms and it was felt that only a few automatic weapons and rifles would be necessary to keep law and order. However, with the arrival of the first Japanese prisoners of war in 1942 things began to change. The first Japanese to arrive were mainly semi-starved and wounded prisoners of war from the New Guinea campaign who, though potentially dangerous, were quite weak from lack of food and the rigours of the jungle. However, as time went on and more prisoners arrived and the weak began to get stronger, it was decided that greater care of the Japanese would be needed with regard to their potential danger than was necessary over the Italians.

All the Japanese in Cowra prison were recorded under false names. The reason for this was that Japanese soldiers felt great dishonour to find themselves captured during wartime, which not only brought disgrace to themselves but upon their entire family. The greatest accolade that could ever honour a Japanese soldier was to be killed in battle. But now that they were prisoners-of-war they knew that none of them could ever return to Japan and that they must die in Australia. The Australian authorities gave the prisoners an opportunity to write home to Japan — a concession granted in all PoW camps — but every single Japanese soldier, airman and sailor refused to do so.

With the increase in the number of Japanese in the camp (there were 1,104 Japanese non-commissioned officers and other ranks at the time of the break-out), the Australian authorities felt it prudent that they should increase the amount of fire-power available to the guards. A number of Vickers, Owen and Bren guns were brought in and set up in various positions around the perimeter fence that were felt the most vulnerable. The Japanese, who were in compound B, worked on vegetable gardens and other tasks around their huts and continued to ask for more tools. They spent a great deal of time in physical fitness playing baseball, wrestling and other activities to get themselves into the peak of physical condition.

Roughly circular in shape, Cowra was divided like pieces of a cake into four separate compounds: A, B, C and D with the quarters for the Australian 22nd Garrison Battalion spread around the perimeter. Italians were confined in Compounds A and C, Japanese in B with their officers, Formosans and Koreans in D.



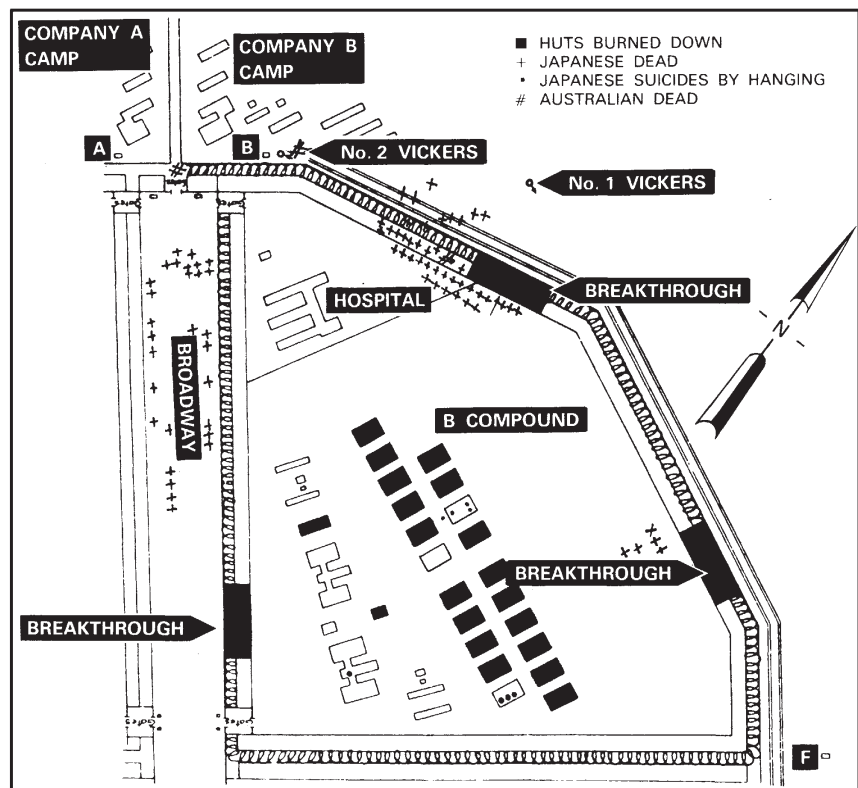


The morning of Saturday, August 5, 1944. Beyond the neatly tended vegetable plot lies the remains of burned out huts in B Compound from which the mass escape attempt took place. (Australian War Memorial)

On May 30, 1944 Captain Lord Kane, the Intelligence Officer, received a report from a Korean prisoner held in the Korean and Formosan compound that there was trouble brewing in Compound B for the Japanese. On June 3, after interrogation, the Korean informed the Australians that there was a plot being hatched in Compound B for a mass escape. As there was a recruit training centre approximately two miles from the prisoner-of-war camp, an arrangement was made by the Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Montague A. Brown, with the training centre for a series of alarms and flares to be set off should any mass escape be attempted. This was all arranged by June 8.

On Friday, August 4, the Commandant of B Camp, Major Robert Ramsay, summoned the camp leader, Sergeant-Major Akira Kanazawa, the assistant camp leader, Sergeant Masao Kojima, and the former camp leader, Sergeant-Pilot Tadao Minami, to his office. He informed them that on Monday, August 7, all prisoners-of-war under the rank of Lance Corporal would be

John Williams' comparison looks out over the same spot today, with only the odd concrete foundations remaining amid the peaceful rolling countryside.





The prisoners used blankets to climb the barbed wire perimeter, in what can only be described as a suicidal attempt to retrieve their honour after having been captured alive, rather than a serious effort of escaping back to Japan. Another picture taken on August 5 for the Court of Inquiry with dead lying beside the wire. (Australian War Memorial)

moving to a new prison camp in Hay. This three-day warning was in accordance with the Geneva Convention rules. When the camp leaders asked why they were not allowed to go with all the privates, one of the camp leaders protested: 'Very bad business. Why can't we all go?' They were informed that the decision had been taken at a higher level. When the camp leaders returned they informed the rest of the inmates of the decision to move all the other ranks to the new camp. The moment of confrontation had arrived. This was the moment the Japanese had been waiting for. Now there was a reason for an escape and, if necessary, for all of them to die right there in Cowra.

At 1.30 a.m. on the morning of August 5 a Japanese prisoner climbed over the inner gate of Camp B and moved towards the outer gate where there were three sentries on duty. The guard, suspicious of what was going on, rang the company guard room. Lieutenant Thomas Aisbett decided to investigate. He checked the outer perimeter and found all guards on alert. The Japanese prisoner was trying to convey some sort of

message to Lieutenant Aisbett but, unable to speak English, no clear communication was understood. Twenty minutes later a bugle call pierced the night air inside Camp B. As the notes died away eleven hundred prisoners came pouring out of the huts and charged towards the perimeter fence. Brandishing an array of weapons ranging from knives and forks, clubs, baseball bats and other homemade instruments, they charged towards the perimeter fence. Lieutenant Aisbett and his three men stood absolutely no chance of stopping this onslaught so they ran towards the southern end of Broadway and the big double gates. They reached them just in time, opened the gates, and closed them behind them. Major Eric Lees, D Camp Commandant, then ordered his men to open fire. By this time several huts were on fire, the flames silhouetting the seething mass of prisoners as they charged the wire. At the subsequent Court of Inquiry he stated that: 'We closed the gates and I ordered my guards to turn out and line the fence and open fire on the mob in the Broadway. There was a lot of rifle, Tommy and Bren gun fire

from the tower. There were five shot absolutely on the threshold of the two gates. A portion of the mob broke open the two gates into to the officers' compound. I ordered the tower to fire on anyone they could see in the officers' compound, but to avoid hitting the buildings. With the exception of isolated cases no one put their head out after that. There were a number shot around about the officers' gates and some in the officers' compound.'

The Japanese, blocked by the double gates, tried furiously to batter them down. Elsewhere in the camp there were heavier sounds of machine gun fire. Unable to get through the gate, the Japanese decided to move back along the Broadway and attempt to force their way into the Korean compound. However, the Koreans showed no enthusiasm for the escape attempt so the Japanese gave up that idea and went back to try and break open the gates into the officers' compound. The wire gave out under the pressure of the weight of bodies against it and the mob poured through into the officers' quarters. The next day it was found that during the mêlée one of the Japanese officers had been shot and another one had been wounded. To add to the confusion a stray bullet had severed the camp's lighting system and the only lights were now coming from the blazing huts in the middle of the compound. The prisoners in the Broadway then split into two groups. One continued its attack on the south gate while the other group headed to the northern end, which was guarded by A and B companies.

Major Ramsay had been asleep at the time but woke and fired off three Very lights which was the alarm signal arranged between the prisoner-of-war camp and the A.I.F. training centre that there was an escape under way. On the north-west perimeter a group of Japanese prisoners, approximately 200 in number, made a determined bid to get through the wire using blankets and eventually climbed over and through the fence. At this moment the Vickers gun manned by Privates Ben Hardy and Ralph Jones opened fire. The gun position was eventually overwhelmed by the Japanese and both Privates Hardy and Jones were killed, both men being subsequently awarded a posthumous George Cross. Their citations read:

'Private Benjamin Gower Hardy [Private Ralph Jones] was on duty with another soldier as the crew of a Vickers machine gun at the No. 12 Prisoner of War Camp, Cowra, guarding the compound in which were



Other Japanese were more deliberate in their desire for atonement. Left: This prisoner, found outside the perimeter had



cut his own throat. Right: Sergeant Major Masao Kojima, one of the ringleaders, hanged himself in the B Compound kitchen.

interned over 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war. On the night of 4th-5th August, 1944, the prisoners staged a mass outbreak, stormed over the perimeter, and bore down on the machine gun crew. Private Hardy and his companion stood their ground and continued to work the gun until they were killed, displaying outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty against an overwhelming onslaught. Private Hardy [Private Jones] met his death in the true British spirit of sacrifice for his country.⁷

London Gazette, September 1, 1950

The Japanese, having killed the two men manning the Vickers, then attempted to turn the gun on the other Australian guards, but Hardy had managed to immobilise it before he was killed and the Japanese were unable to bring it into action. Approximately 30 Australian riflemen then opened up on the Japanese trying to get the Vickers working, killing some and driving off the rest.

As the sun rose on Saturday morning the scene was one of death and destruction, with bodies littering the compounds, hanging on the barbed wire and lying amid the burned-out remains of the huts. Of the 1,104 Japanese who had occupied B Compound, 588 escaped into the Broadway but got no further; 138 did not leave the camp, and 378 escaped over the wire of the outer perimeter. The number of Japanese casualties were 231 killed and 130 wounded. Of the dead, 183 had been shot and 29 were found to have committed suicide by hanging or by stabbing each other to death. Two prisoners had sacrificed themselves in front of a train coming from Blaney to Cowra. Another 12 were killed from unstated causes and 5 from combined gunshot and self-inflicted wounds.

The Australians had lost four men killed, with four being wounded. Those killed at the camp were Private Benjamin Hardy, Private Ralph Jones and Private Charles Shepherd, while Lieutenant Harry Doncaster was killed by an unknown number of Japanese whilst rounding prisoners up in the Cowra district.

Over the next few days the Japanese who had managed to escape into the surrounding countryside were recaptured and returned to the prisoner-of-war camp.

The 231 dead Japanese were buried along with the four Australians at the Cowra Cemetery, which is now maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Also buried there in the Japanese section are the other Japanese prisoners-of-war, airmen shot down over Australia, and internees who died during the war.

This incident remains unique in Australian and Japanese history as the greatest escape of all time. However, as one looks out today,



A bloody assortment of improvised weapons recovered including sharpened and pointed cutlery, toothed saws and bread knives, nail-studded wood and lengths of iron pipe. (Australian War Memorial)



With thousands of Australian prisoners in Japanese hands, the Australian Government was most anxious that news of the escape which had resulted in over 200 dead and many more wounded should not reach Japan before the full facts were known. An immediate Court of Inquiry was convened which assembled at Cowra on the Monday morning before the dead had been buried. After inspecting the carnage in and around Compound B, that evening members of the Inquiry watched as the first bodies were buried in Cowra War Cemetery — in long mass graves which had been bulldozed in the hard winter ground. Above: Some 50 Australian soldiers, assisted by Italian POWs, clear the burial area.



The Japanese corner of the cemetery today — Judy Cunnington inspects the two memorials, one erected in 1978 by the Japanese Cowra Association.





The Court met each day in the camp's YMCA recreation hut and interviewed a total of 61 witnesses before it returned to Sydney on August 14 to consider its findings. These were relayed to the Japanese Government a week later via Switzerland. By this time all the 334 prisoners who had managed to escape had been rounded up, including 25 found dead. Above: The Australians had lost four men (with another four wounded). Privates Jones, Hardy and Shepherd and Lieutenant Doncaster were laid to rest in Plot D of Cowra War Cemetery — the author's daughter standing in for the relatives of four decades ago.

over 40 years later, on the spot where the camp used to be among the gently sloping hills of Cowra, all that is visible are the brick foundations of the huts and the cows grazing, and it is difficult to imagine what it must have been like that day when so many lives were lost in what can only be called a senseless, indeed deliberately suicidal, attempt to restore honour to those Japanese who felt that the shame of defeat was more important than life itself.



Private Ralph Jones (*left*) and Private Ben Hardy (*right*) were killed when their Vickers (No. 2 on the plan on page 39) was engulfed by waves of fanatical Japanese. Once it had been captured, the prisoners attempted to turn the gun round but it is believed that Hardy was in the act of rendering the gun inoperable when he was clubbed to death. Both soldiers were awarded the George Cross after the war. Of the other two casualties, Private Charles Shepherd received fatal stab wounds as he emerged from B Company guardroom, and Lieutenant Harry Doncaster was found some distance from the camp. At the Inquest on the dead held in December, the Coroner stated that Lieutenant Doncaster's death was very much regretted as 'it appears that he was sent out to assist in capturing escaped prisoners of war, and that he was unarmed and had no weapon of defence; that his death was a tragedy and should never have occurred as at that time the prisoners were desperate men.'

