

RIGHT: TERUO MURAKAMI, 93, AT THE SITE OF HIS ATTEMPTED BREAKOUT DURING HIS 2014 VISIT. (PETER RAE/THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD/FAIRFAX MEDIA/GETTY)

In the biggest mass breakout of World War Two, a thousand Japanese prisoners of war threatened to overwhelm their Australian guards. **Steve Snelling** highlights the selfless gallantry of the British-born hero of Cowra, whose desperate action helped avert a massacre 75 year ago.

Edward Vivian Timms was one of Australia's most popular storytellers, renowned for his ripping yarns and historical melodramas. In the space of 15 prodigious years in the early to mid-1940s, the failed farmer, who had been invalided home from Gallipoli as a 20-year-old, had racked up 12 best-selling novels, five film screenplays and a clutch of radio plays.

His was a success story born of a fertile imagination and a passion for history. What his books lacked in literary merit was more than compensated by page-turning plots pulsating with action and adventure.

Nothing Timms wrote could rival the real-life drama in which he found himself improbably embroiled as his worst nightmare came true some 240 miles (390km) west of Sydney, on the edge of the New South Wales outback. There, in the heart of rich and rolling sheep and wheat



Banzai Breakout



country near the small town of Cowra, the 49-year-old novelist turned prison camp guard was a participant in the biggest and bloodiest battle fought on the Australian mainland during the war.

Years later, he would recall the moment when the uneasy peace at 12 Prisoner of War Camp was unceremoniously shattered by a single, piercing bugle call that was followed by a chilling chant that heralded a night of carnage and courage like no other. An answering splutter of rifle fire was quickly drowned in a roar of "Banzai! Banzai!" as hundreds of burgundy-clad Japanese prisoners of war armed with a deadly array of knives, baseball bats and wooden clubs studded with nails surged forward in what Timms called a "frenzied mission of self-destruction".

It was shortly before 2am on August 5, 1944, and beneath the icy glow of a full, frosty moon, the world's biggest ever prison breakout was under way. Amid horrific scenes of fire and fury that made even the most lurid of Timms' potboilers appear tame, a desperate struggle unfolded. It would throw up two of the war's most unlikely heroes in the shape of a couple of middle-aged citizen soldiers, one – Ben Hardy – a mollycoddled Australian from Sydney and the other – Ralph Jones – a balding, mild-mannered Englishman whose life was shadowed by tragedy and misfortune.

Persevering

Ralph's story was positively Dickensian in its wretched saga of hard times and thwarted endeavour. Born in Gorleston, near Great Yarmouth, on September 26, 1900, he was the youngest boy in a poor, working class family of 16. By the age of 20, he had already lost a brother in an industrial accident and a sister to tuberculosis. Called up at the end of the Great War, his own service with the Rifle Brigade in Germany as part of the British Army of Occupation was cut short by the same lung disease, which resulted in him being invalided out with a small pension in April 1920.

Remembered as a quiet, good-natured person who enjoyed reading, he was tall and slim, with high cheekbones and sunken eyes that seemed to exaggerate his poor health. Before joining the army he had worked as a teenager for the Yarmouth port authority, earning a glowing testimonial from the harbour engineer who described him as "steady, obliging, willing, persevering [and] attentive".

The same official had "every confidence in recommending him for similar employment", but the post-war depression and his own poor health proved insurmountable obstacles to finding a ▶



job after leaving the army. According to his sister, Gladys Pilgrim, his bout of tuberculosis had left him with “a ticking cough” that showed little sign of going away.

Quite when he decided to emigrate is not clear but, by the mid-1920s he had undoubtedly come round to the idea of Australia being the panacea for all his woes, a Promised Land in which he could be healthy and secure. “Ralph was courting at the time,” his sister recollected, “and his girlfriend’s brother went to Australia. He wrote saying how good it was out there and I think that’s where Ralph got the idea to go. I think his girl was supposed to follow him.”

Sad Letters

For a while at least, Ralph’s hopes were realised. Letters home told of him finding employment, first as a motor apprentice in Melbourne and then, between 1927 and 1930, in a Sydney rubber works. The good times, however, lasted barely four years before the worldwide financial slump caught up with him. His letters home grew fewer and those that did reach his family in Gorleston spoke mostly of a struggle to find work.

His niece, Stella Garnham, recalled reading those sad letters: “I remember

“ He was approaching 40: too old to fight, but young enough to serve his adopted country ”

once he mentioned he was in the Bush, washing for gold. He never said much, just wrote about the people who were kind to him. He wanted to come home but he couldn’t afford to pay his way back.” In another letter, he wrote of “trapping wild animals” and “living in a cave”. And that was about the last his family in England heard from him.

Not till years later did they hear of his continuing travails, of how he had helped to care for a seriously ill man and of how he had eventually taken lodgings with a Mrs Madeleine Cook in the former gold rush town of Tuena in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales. By 1939 he had apparently drifted to the larger town of Crookwell, some 40 miles away, where he found work as a labourer.

He was approaching 40: too old to fight, but young enough to serve his adopted country. According to his service record, he enlisted at Goulburn, New South Wales, on January 15, 1942, a month before the fall of Singapore.

Alarm at Japan’s lightning advance through Malaya and across the South Pacific was fast reaching a peak, with increasing fears of the conflict spreading to the Australian mainland. However, Ralph’s decision to join up appears to have been influenced less by the threat of invasion than the prospect of returning home. According to a letter sent to his family by



ABOVE: A VIEW OF B COMPOUND AT 12 AUSTRALIAN PRISONER OF WAR CAMP, NEAR COWRA.

RIGHT: THE WEST END OF THE CAMP ON THE DAY AFTER THE BREAKOUT. IT SHOWS THE JAPANESE OFFICER’S D COMPOUND ON THE LEFT, NEXT TO A COMPOUND WHICH HOUSED ITALIAN POWS. THE BUILDINGS BEYOND THE WIRE AT THE TOP WERE OCCUPIED BY ONE OF THE GUARD COMPANIES. (AWM)

OPPOSITE: EDWARD TIMMS, A GALLIPOLI VETERAN AND PROLIFIC NOVELIST, WAS SERVING AS AN ACTING MAJOR AT THE COWRA CAMP (UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND LIBRARY)



Madeleine Cook, he saw it as “his one means of getting back to England”.

If true, he was to be sorely disappointed. Either on account of his age or his previous ill health, or perhaps a combination of both, he was barred from active service and assigned instead to home duties with a posting no further away than the newly established prisoner of war and internment camp near Cowra.

Real Danger

On February 24, 1942, Pte Jones joined the 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion, a militia unit composed mostly of old or disabled veterans, with a smattering of younger men considered physically unfit for frontline service. Commanded by ex-Bengal Lancer Lieutenant-Colonel Montague 'Monty' Brown, the unit was tasked with guarding the formally styled 12 Prisoner of War Group, a vast, almost circular encampment covering 28 hectares. It measured 800 yards (730m) in diameter, divided into four equal-sized camps, each separated from the other by thick belts of densely tangled barbed wire and all surrounded by a wide barrier of perimeter wire. ▶

RIGHT: OFFICERS FROM THE 22ND GARRISON BATTALION A FEW MONTHS BEFORE THE BREAKOUT. INCLUDED AMONG THEM IS THE COWRA CAMP COMMANDANT, LT-COL. MONTY BROWN, SEATED CENTRE.

BELOW: A MEMBER OF THE GARRISON BATTALION STANDING GUARD OVER THE CAMP SHORTLY BEFORE THE BREAKOUT. (AWM)

OPPOSITE: ONE OF THE WATCHTOWERS OVERLOOKING A LINE OF LIGHTS BORDERING THE OUTER FENCE. (AWM)

Originally intended to house Italian, German and Vichy French prisoners of war and civilian internees, it was still under construction when the first captives arrived in October 1941 and was not yet complete when Ralph took up his post. Together with the internees, prisoners, builders and fellow guards, Ralph had to make do with tented accommodation until April, when the first huts became available.



Work on the camp, which included a 55 yard (50m) wide, electrically-lit road running north to south and known as Broadway, continued throughout the rest of 1942, during which it became home to around 2,000 mainly Italian prisoners of war captured in the Middle East.

For the guards faced with a largely peaceful prison population content to sit out the war, the biggest struggle was against boredom. However, all of that changed with the influx of sullen Japanese airmen and soldiers, who viewed their capture and very survival as a betrayal of their warrior code. As the Japanese numbers grew, so too did the incidences of disobedience and open hostility. Writing later, Edward Timms, who had been posted to Cowra as a temporary major in charge of the Italian compound, spoke of the changed atmosphere. "They did not understand the articles of the Geneva Convention," he observed. "Their government... did not subscribe to or observe it, and our strict adherence to its terms merely amused them and further convinced them of our moral and spiritual weakness. They read into our humane treatment... a desire to placate them, and this they felt sure sprang from our secret fear of them."

Fearful or not, there was growing cause for concern. By the summer of 1944, the camp's swollen prison population included more than 1,100 Japanese soldiers in Compound B and hundreds more Japanese officers, Koreans and Formosans in Compound D. Worse still was the evidence contained in an intelligence report based on an interview with a Korean captive, who claimed to overheard plans for a mass breakout from Compound B at a time and date as yet unspecified, with the objective of overwhelming the guards before moving

on to attack a nearby training camp full of raw soldiers.

Not everyone took the threat seriously, but Monty Brown and Edward Timms were among those who did. Timms, in particular, was worried. Already aware of the physical prowess of the Japanese prisoners – he had seen them training “day in and day out... by wrestling and baseball” – and now aware of their apparent objective, he felt more than ever convinced that “their challenge, if it came, would be a serious one”.

Indeed, at a commandants’ conference held in the second week of June, he went further. “We’ve got to face the fact,” he told assembled officers, “[that] the garrison is numerically inferior. If there is a break, and they do get out, the people of Cowra could be in real danger.” It wasn’t only the shortage of guards that bothered him, it was the camp’s overall design which was at fault. He wrote: “The adopted lay-out with its merely breast-high wire, its dim and chequered lighting, its observation towers with their obsolete Lewis and Hotchkiss light machine guns, was perhaps suitable for the holding of Italians who had ‘given the war away’, but was palpably dangerous and chancy for the caging of more than a thousand Japanese fanatics.”

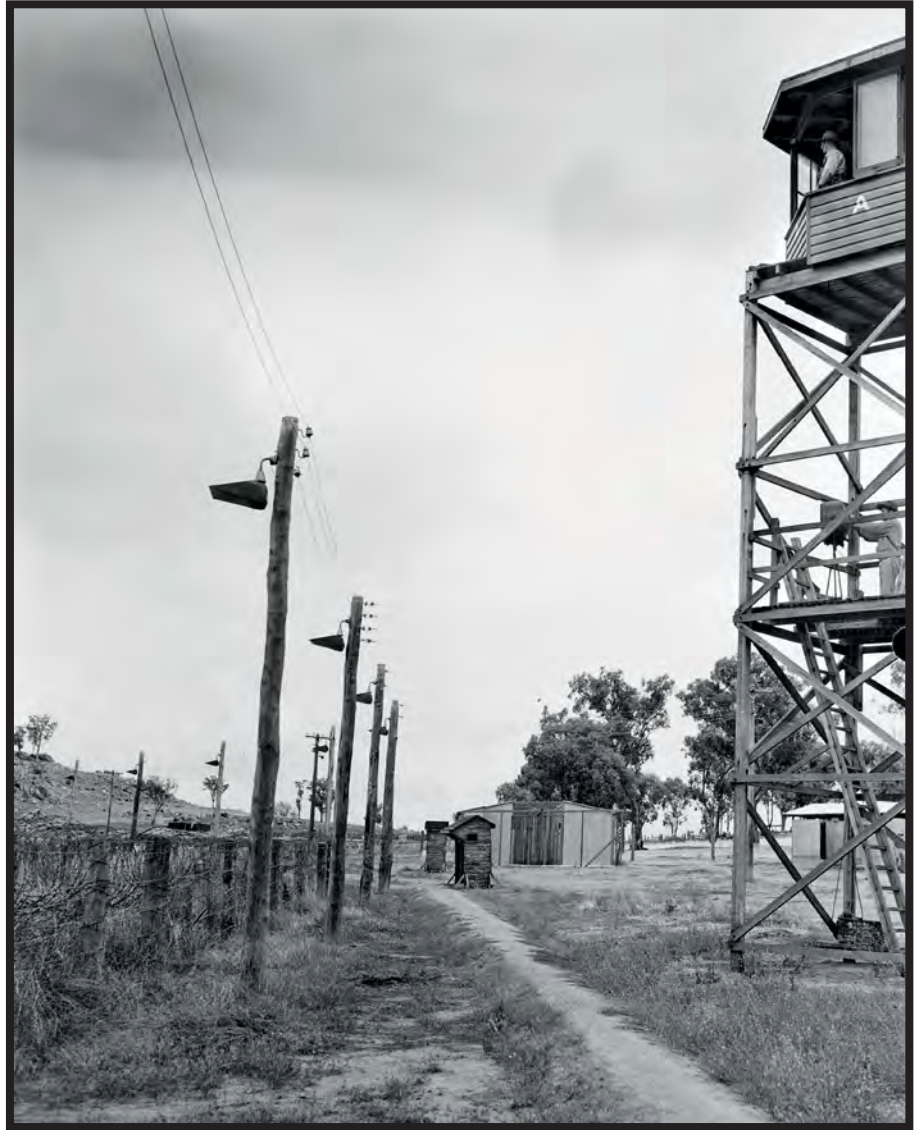
Compound B had become a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

Too Late

Monty Brown was quick to react to the danger. As well as alerting senior officers, he made clear his own misgivings, prompting a summons to the headquarters of the Adjutant General in Sydney, where he laid bare his concerns. Asked what he required to deal with the potential threat, he asked for two Vickers machine guns, Bren guns and Owen submachine guns, together with more rifles – all of which he received with remarkable alacrity. He also received additional Lewis guns.

Strangely, however, he did not seek any reinforcements to bolster his 640-strong garrison. Nor did he attempt to limit the Japanese strength-building exercise routines or issue orders for a search of the camp for the kind of improvised weapons that many feared were being stashed away in readiness for a general uprising.

Anxious to avoid letting the Japanese know that he was aware of their plan, he instead adopted a ‘softly, softly’ approach. Almost imperceptibly, security was tightened. Guards, particularly those covering B Compound, were warned to be more vigilant without being told the reason why. At the same time, a new guard post was established midway along the



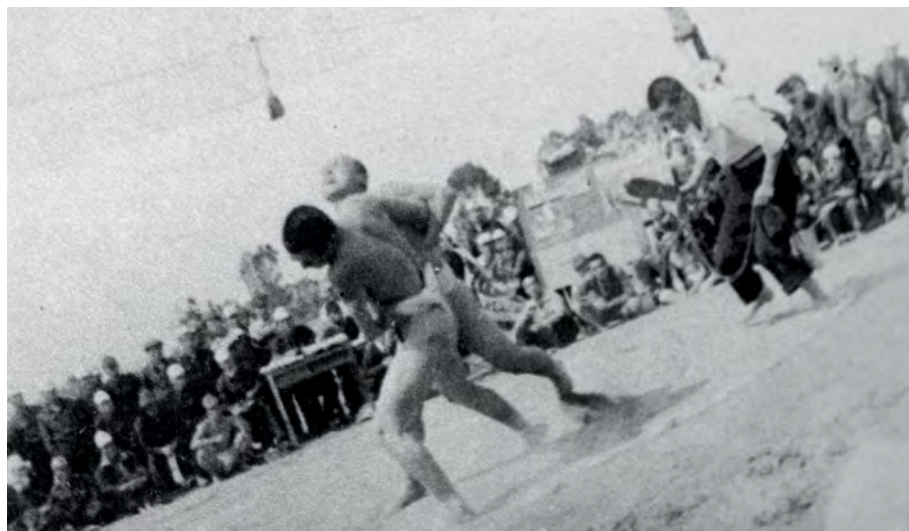
Broadway, while the garrison was issued orders to sleep with their weapons beside them and provision was made to supply every man with 50 rounds of ammunition.

Of the additional armament, the most lethal weapons – the two Vickers guns – were set up with fixed lines of fire

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towards the B Compound boundary fences. One of them was mounted on a four-wheel trailer overlooking the wire barrier separating the prison area from ‘B’ Company headquarters, though, inexplicably, neither it nor the other gun were permanently manned despite the growing tension. In fact, their presence was regarded as a mixed blessing. As Timms observed, their appearance “at the eleventh hour” was “too late to square the circle of the perimeter so that garrison fire would not be as great a menace to the garrison as it would be to enemy prisoners. Anyone firing across a circle of only 800 yards diameter with modern weapons is as likely to hit anyone on the other side of the circle as anyone within it”.

Moreover, they were plainly not a deterrent to an enemy whose ultimate aim, according to Jun-i (Warrant Officer) Akira Kanazawa, the camp leader and driving force behind the breakout, was ▶



not so much to inflict death or injury on their captors as expunge their own perceived shame by dying for their emperor in one last suicidal charge. Ironically, the trigger for the 'explosion' that Brown was so eager to avert came from a mishandled attempt on the part of the Australian authorities to defuse the situation. It began with an intelligence recommendation for the separation of the non-commissioned officers, who were regarded as the main source of trouble, from the camp's private soldiers. In the days that followed, secret lists were drawn up for the removal of 700 men to another camp.

The news was broken to the Japanese on the afternoon of Friday, August 4, with instructions for the move to take place the following Monday. It's not clear whether details of the separation by rank was disclosed at this meeting but, by late afternoon, the prisoners in Compound B were fully aware of what lay ahead.

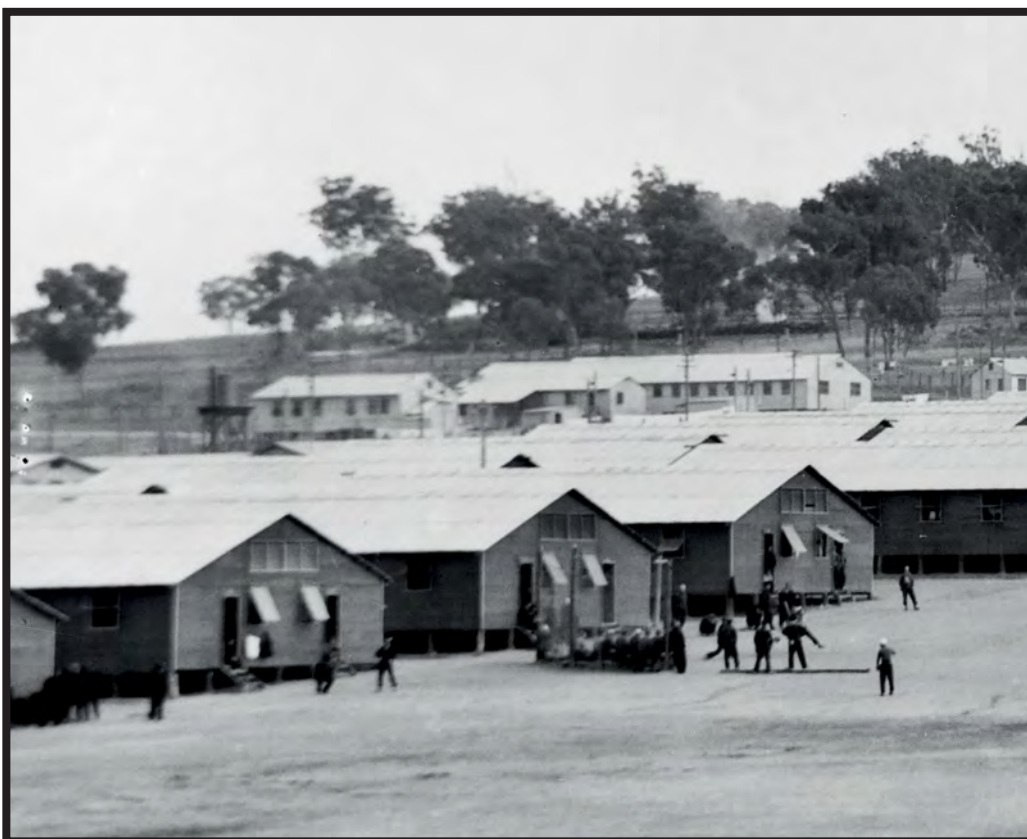
The consequences were incendiary. A meeting of hut leaders was hastily convened at which Kanazawa urged that the breakout plan be implemented the same night. Debates followed in each hut before a vote was taken. The result was a majority in favour, with those opposed to it agreeing to show solidarity. The die was cast. Weapons were taken from their hiding places, preparations made to torch the huts, and blankets and baseball gloves to overcome the wire fences gathered together.

By midnight, the details of Kanazawa's plan had been agreed and final instructions issued. Timed to begin at 2am, when it was reckoned the bulk of the garrison would be fast asleep following the usual Friday night bouts of drinking, it involved four simultaneous attacks by parties of 200-300 men.

“ The dark, frenzied figures of these men could be seen lined in the red light likeimps from hell, and into the holocaust leapt those who craved death by the consuming fire ”

Of these, the most hazardous and most critical was to be carried out by prisoners from the four huts at the northern end of the compound. Their task was in the manner of a race against time, to seize the trailer-mounted Vickers before it could be manned – or at least before it could wreak havoc among the escaping hordes. Much hinged on the success of this mission. Capture of the gun intact would almost certainly ensure the annihilation of the dazed and confused men from 'B' Company as they struggled from their accommodation huts and attempted to reach their 'stand-to' positions.

As the minutes ticked by, an eerie silence settled over the compound. Inside the huts, strained nerves were settled by gulps of home-brewed sake as the prisoners bid each other a last farewell. In the four guard rooms, the reliefs were awake and making ready to take over from those whose wearying tour of duty was almost over. However, before the handover could take place, at around 1.45am, the lone Broadway guard spotted a movement in the shadows of B Compound. One of the prisoners had cracked. Unable to go through with his comrades' suicidal contract, he had fled in a desperate effort to alert the garrison. Making his way over the wire, he dashed towards the gate. He appeared hysterical, shouting incomprehensibly.



Taking no chance, the guard fired two warning shots into the air, which quickly brought an officer and two more guards running towards him. They were still trying to make sense of the plainly terrified prisoner when they spotted hundreds of dark figures massing near the huts inside B Compound.

Realising the danger immediately, the officer shouted: "Run for your lives!" They sprinted for the southern Broadway gates just as the thin notes of the bugle sounded the breakout.

Imps From Hell

The hapless guards just made it through the gate in time to see a crowd of burgundy-clad prisoners surge across Broadway. The guard tower stood empty and silent, while B Compound erupted in mayhem. As planned, two parties dashed separately towards Broadway, while two more rushed the northern boundary fence. Within minutes, four tidal waves were lapping the wire, which was crushing down, as Timms put it, "with blankets and their own impetuous weight".

Minutes later, the first flames were roaring from huts set afire by the escaping prisoners. "Up went the tailor's shop," wrote Timms, "then the large huts began to flare, and soon the camp was an inferno in which

the asbestos roofs exploded like grenades. The dark, frenzied figures of these men could be seen lined in the red light like imps from hell, and into the holocaust leapt those who craved death by the consuming fire..."

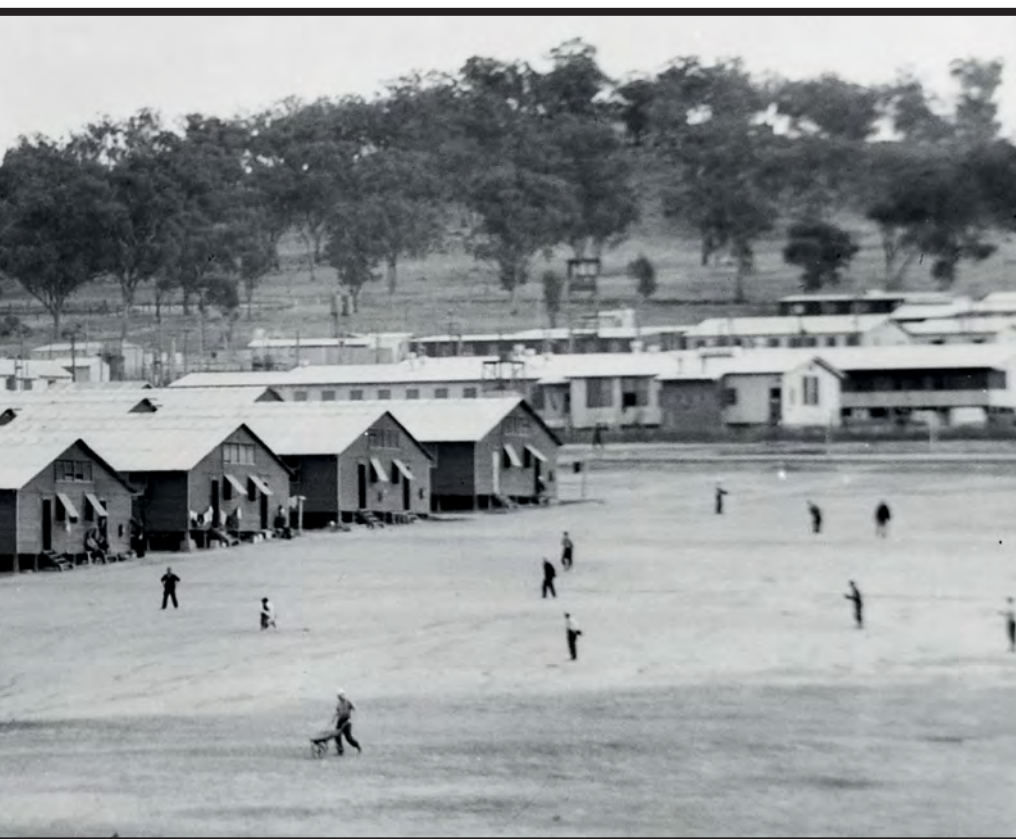
Against this ghastly backdrop, the most crucial race of the struggle was on, between a screaming mob hundreds strong and two middle-aged bachelors, their hastily snatched greatcoats flapping open over their army regulation pyjamas.

Ralph Jones and Ben Hardy had a little over 50 yards to run from their huts in the 'B' Company lines outside the northern

gateway to the trailer-mounted Vickers gun. The Japanese had four-times as much ground to cover, as well as three 3¼ft high barbed wire fences and a thick tangle of wire in between, but they had the advantage of a head-start, not to mention their youthful vigour. Aged 45 and 43 respectively, Hardy and Jones were almost twice the age of many of the men surging inexorably towards the gun. Neither one of them had seen action before, though Hardy, who came from Sydney where he lived with his doting mother and sister, was at least an expert shot who delighted in weapon drills.

To make matters worse, neither of them was in prime physical condition. Jones, in particular, was plagued with ill health. His thoroughly unremarkable service record thus far comprised a litany of minor misdemeanours interspersed with repeated visits to the hospital. On the night of the breakout, he had been preparing to go on guard duty, where he was due to act as 'stick orderly' to the officer in charge. Instead, he found himself running and stumbling as fast as he could towards a weapon he had rarely if ever operated with the maddened screams of the advancing Japanese growing louder and coming closer with every yard covered.

By the time, Jones and Hardy clambered up onto the trailer, both men were breathing heavily, but there was no time to rest. The leading Japanese were ▶



OPPOSITE: THE JAPANESE PRISONERS IN B COMPOUND USED SPORT, SUCH AS SUMO WRESTLING, AS A MEANS TO RELIEVE BOREDOM AND PREPARE FOR THE BREAKOUT.

ABOVE: RALPH JONES' GEORGE CROSS GROUP IS DISPLAYED IN THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL'S HALL OF VALOUR. (AWM)

LEFT: JAPANESE PRISONERS PLAYING BASEBALL IN B COMPOUND. (AWM)

BELOW: A SCENE OF DEVASTATION IN B COMPOUND AFTER THE FIRES HAD BURNED THEMSELVES OUT.

OPPOSITE: ONE OF THE LEATHER BASEBALL GLOVES USED BY THE JAPANESE TO CLIMB THE BARBED WIRE FENCES.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: BENJAMIN HARDY. (AWM)

already clambering over the first fence, barely 75 yards away, when Hardy took his place behind the gun and Jones pulled a belt of ammunition from the ammunition boxes stacked alongside. A stream of bullets caught the prisoners as they were still battling to overcome the compound perimeter barriers. The chattering gun, its field of fire restricted by two wooden chocks, tore into the front ranks with deadly effect, leaving more than 20 bodies draped along the concertina wire. As quickly as they fell, others took their places.

More men died in the wire between the fences, some killed outright by the relentless hail of fire and others by their own hands after being wounded. But try as they might, the two machine gunners could not kill them fast enough.

Within minutes, the perimeter, its fences festooned with blankets and dead prisoners, had been breached and a horde of club- and knife-wielding Japanese were bearing down on the trailer. By then, it must have been plain to both men that their fate was almost certainly sealed.

Their only chance was to make a run for it while there was still an outside chance of escaping. For reasons which will never be known, they chose to remain at their posts.

With no sign of reinforcements – in the chaos and confusion, a party assigned to offer support were diverted elsewhere – and nothing but a three-strand barbed wire fence between them and the charging mob, the end was inevitable.

They Got Us!

In those final moments, a stray bullet severed an electricity cable, extinguishing all the lights around the camp, but it hardly mattered. The Japanese were close enough to be clearly visible in the bright moonlight. Around 50 of them were cut down between the perimeter and the trailer, but now they were everywhere, swarming below and behind them. In a desperate effort to hold them off, Hardy was forced to stand almost upright in a frantic bid to depress the gun sufficiently to fire into the ruck below.

Only then, with the trailer surrounded and their position hopeless, did the pair think of their own safety. Above the din, Hardy was heard to call out to his comrade: “Get going, Ralph!” But it was already too late. Jones escaped one lunge from a knife before attempting to vault over the heads of his assailants. Clubbed repeatedly, he

fell and was stabbed in the back and chest. Somehow, he succeeded in breaking free and managed to stagger 100 yards to the nearest hut, where his last words were: “They got us!”

Hardy fought on until the bitter end. According to subsequent accounts, his final act before being clubbed to death, was to remove vital parts from the gun in a frantic attempt to render it useless. Whether he succeeded or not remains a matter of conjecture but, for reasons uncertain, when the Japanese turned the captured gun towards the ‘B’ Company lines it immediately jammed and was eventually abandoned.

The key objective of the initial breakout had been thwarted thanks to the actions of two brave men. In the face of overwhelming odds, the middle-aged Australian and his English mate had not only averted the likely massacre of the garrison, but also gained a breathing space that enabled the heavily outnumbered guards to recover from the first shock of the Japanese onslaught and to man the machine guns that turned the tide. Monty Brown was not alone in believing that Hardy and Jones had “voluntarily sacrificed their lives in order to save their companions”. As one of the guards, Corporal Alf Lee, later said of their heroic defence of No.2 Vickers gun: “We knew that if the Japs turned it on to our position we would be wiped out.





“ These soldiers met their death in the true British spirit of sacrifice for their country ”

We knew Hardy and Jones were trying to prevent this. [And] we knew five minutes after the action had started [that] they had succeeded in doing so.”

The fight at Cowra went on through the early hours of August 5 and the round-up of escapees would last another nine days. The morning after the so-called ‘mutiny’ revealed a scene of devastation that was, in Edward Timms’ words, “grim and bloody”. He wrote: “B camp, with the exception of a few buildings, was a charred and blackened ruin. Japanese dead lay singly and in heaps in Broadway and right round the eastern perimeter. The surrounding hills were sprinkled with burgundy-clad bodies and in the trees of the southeast gully swung more dead.”

A white rag held aloft around dawn heralded the surrender of hundreds of

prisoners trapped in a stone drain near the southern end of Broadway. Of the 1,100 Japanese who participated in the war’s biggest prison breakout, 231 died in the attempt, killed either by guards or by their own hands, a further 108 were wounded and more than 330 made it beyond the wire and were subsequently recaptured.

Casualties among the men of 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion were light. Aside from Hardy and Jones, only one other guard was killed and three more injured, but it had been a close-run thing.

True Spirit of Sacrifice

A subsequent inquiry would highlight the failings in security leading to the retirement of ‘B’ Company’s commander and the dismissal of the camp’s senior officer. It would also acknowledge the selfless sacrifice of the crew of No.2 Vickers gun. Not long after news of Ralph’s death reached his family back in Gorleston, another parcel arrived. It contained a small silver pendant with the simple but heartfelt inscription: “With the grateful thanks of the people of Cowra”.

Official recognition took longer. Almost six years later, following the persistent

efforts of their former comrades, the *London Gazette* announced posthumous awards of the George Cross to Privates Benjamin Gower Hardy and Ralph Jones. The joint citation published on September 1, 1950, concluded with the words: “These soldiers met their death in the true British spirit of sacrifice for their country.”

They were the last such awards to honour acts of bravery performed during World War Two and, though long overdue, were warmly greeted by their fellow guards, many of whom felt they owed their lives to them. As one old soldier, Albert Reeves, later wrote: “They could have saved their lives if they had left their post, but if they had done so many of the balance of the company would have been killed... All members of the company regarded their action in the highest light.” ●



i Further Reading

Many of the illustrations for this feature were kindly supplied by the Australian War Memorial (AWM). For those unfamiliar with the AWM’s inspiring work, it combines a world-class museum at Australian Capital Territory, with an extensive physical and online archive. The memorial’s purpose is to commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war or on operational service and those who have served the nation in times of conflict. A visit to the AWM’s website is highly recommended. www.awm.gov.au