

APPENDIX 5

THE PRISON BREAK AT COWRA, AUGUST 1944

Despite the fact that Japanese troops had been schooled to die rather than surrender there were, by August 1944, 2,223 Japanese prisoners of war in Australia, including 544 merchant seamen. There were also 14,720 Italian prisoners, mostly from the Middle East, and 1,585 Germans, mostly naval or merchant seamen.

During the years when it was known in Australia that most of the 21,000 Australian prisoners in Japanese hands were being under-fed and over-worked and that many were dying of disease and malnutrition, the Japanese prisoners in Australian camps were well fed, were living in comfortable quarters, and were thriving. By August 1944 10,200 Italian prisoners, including 200 officers, were working, without guards, on farms or in hostels; some German prisoners were employed in labour detachments, but under guard; the possibility of employing working parties of Japanese prisoners was being considered.

At this time 1,104 Japanese prisoners were in No. 12 Prisoner of War Compound near Cowra, the centre of an agricultural district in the middle west of New South Wales. This establishment was divided into four camps: "A" for Italians, "B" for Japanese, "C" for Koreans, and "D" for Indonesians. The whole compound formed an octagon about 800 yards across, and the four camps were separated by two intersecting roads and were fenced with thick barbed-wire entanglements about 8 feet high. The 22nd Garrison Battalion guarded the prisoners, its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Brown,¹ holding also the appointment of commander of the "Cowra P.W. and Internment Group".

Six 30-foot observation towers overlooked the compound and at night lights from these towers swept the camps and fixed lights lit up the wire and the roads.

As the Japanese improved in health and strength as a result of their good rations, and of constant wrestling and baseball, their spirits rose. An officer of the 22nd Garrison Battalion wrote later:

They did not understand the Articles of the Geneva Convention . . . 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 of them a desire to placate them, and this they felt sure sprang from our secret fear of them.²

Information was received at the Group headquarters early in August that the Japanese were discussing a mass outbreak. Additional precautions were taken, and also it was decided to move all the Japanese privates from Cowra to Hay (N.S.W.), where there was another big P.W. Group.

¹ Col M. A. Brown, ED, N11. (1st AIF: Lt LH. Indian Army 1917-22.) GSO1 1 Cav Div 1940-42; CO 22 Grn Bn 1942-44 and Comd Cowra PW and Internment Gp 1943-44. Secretary; of Dapto, NSW; b. Candelo, NSW, 10 Jul 1889.

² E. V. Timms, "The Blood Bath at Cowra", in *As You Were* (1946). Timms, a novelist, had served in the A.I.F. in 1914-17 and was a major in the 22nd Garrison Battalion.

The Geneva Convention provides that prisoners must be given 24 hours' notice of such a move, and on 4th August notice was given to the Japanese camp leader that all Japanese at Cowra except officers and N.C.O's were to go to Hay on the 7th. That night the guards were alert and tense. About 2 a.m. a Japanese ran to the camp gates and shouted what seemed to be a warning to the sentries. Then a Japanese bugle sounded. A sentry fired a warning shot. More sentries fired as three mobs of prisoners, shouting "Banzai", began breaking through the wire, one mob on the northern side, one on the western and one on the southern. They flung themselves across the wire with the help of blankets. They were armed with knives, baseball bats, clubs studded with nails and hooks, wire stilettos and garotting cords.

The Australians on guard duty were now firing into the groups of prisoners. The men not on guard, most of whom were sleeping fully clothed with rifles and 50 rounds beside them, raced out to reinforce the guard.

The strongest group of Japanese—about 400, broke through the wire on the north-west. Here Privates Hardy³ and Jones⁴ punched their way through the prisoners, manned a Vickers gun and fired it until they were knifed and clubbed to death. The Japanese swung the gun round to fire on the Australians' huts but it jammed, and its Japanese crew was killed. No Japanese succeeded in crossing the road that bisected the compound from east to west. Here the fire was so deadly that soon more than 200 Japanese were sheltering in a deep drain from which they emerged at dawn to surrender. Meanwhile Japanese who had remained in the camp had set fire to every building in it.

Some hundreds of prisoners had now broken away into the open country, where camp guards, troops from a training camp two or three miles away and two police constables were soon rounding them up. The Japanese offered no resistance in this phase. Some of them hanged themselves from trees before they were found by the searching troops.

The two policemen concerned were Constable A. P. McGovern of Mandurama and Constable C. H. R. Cooper of Woodstock. They promptly informed all residents of the two small towns and all outlying settlers what had happened and then worked long hours for several days searching for Japanese. Cooper arrested eight of them single-handed and three in company with McGovern.

Including those who killed themselves, 234 Japanese died and 108 were wounded. Thirty-one killed themselves and 12 were burnt to death in huts set on fire by Japanese. Sixteen of the wounded showed signs of attempted suicide. The 22nd Garrison Battalion lost 3 killed and 3 wounded.

³ Pte B. G. Hardy, GC, N103951; 22 Grn Bn. Motor mechanic; of Willoughby, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 28 Aug 1898. Killed in action 5 Aug 1944.

⁴ Pte R. Jones, GC, N244527; 22 Grn Bn. Labourer; of Crookwell, NSW; b. Gorleston-on-Sea, England, 26 Sep 1900. Killed in action 5 Aug 1944.