



Cowra Prisoner of War Campsite

The following information has been compiled from the NSW Heritage Site.

The Cowra Prisoner of War Camp was constructed in 1941-2 to house Italian POWs captured by Allied Forces during WWII. It was part of a nationwide system of POW confinement and enemy alien containment. In all, twenty-eight major camps were established in Australia by the British Military Board during this period. The camp was to consist of four compounds, two with permanent amenities and two temporary. Although officially operating from June 1941, the first internees were marched into Cowra nearly four months later, on 15 October 1941. The major building program was still underway at this time and was not completed until well into 1944. Both POW and local labourers were used to complete construction, the prisoners living in tents until April 1942 when accommodation huts became available.

By December 1942 over 2,000 mainly Italian, prisoners and internees were housed in the camp. Between January 1943 and August 1944, over one thousand Japanese POWs and internees arrived. By the end of June 1944 the camp was already overcrowded beyond its intended capacity. At 2 am on 5 August 1944 the Japanese prisoners staged an outbreak, during which over 300 escaped outright and over 250 died. 18 buildings were burnt to the ground. This action has remained significant in popular memory as the first time the War was fought on home soil and as the largest revolt of its kind in Australia's history. This has often overshadowed the experience of the Italian, Javanese and assorted other ethnic groups which populated the camp during its operation.

After the end of the War the camp and its surrounds were sold to the New South Wales Department of Agriculture and a private owner. Part of the site remains within a public reserve. The private part of the site is used for grazing and crop cultivation. (Blackmore et.al. 1988: 6-18)

The following is compiled from the Australian National Heritage register.

The Cowra Prisoner of War Camp site, operating 1941-1947, is significant as one component of a national body of evidence which documents one of the most profound physical impacts of WWII on Australian soil, being part of a nationwide system of POW confinement and enemy alien containment. The POW Camp site, constructed to house largely Italian POWs captured by Allied Forces during WWII, came to house prisoners from a number of countries including Italy, Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, Java and Japan. The first internees (Italians) arrived on 15 October 1941.

The Camp Site was also the site of a significant event in Australian history, when on

5 August 1944, 1100 Japanese POWs attempted a break-out. This event has historical and military significance being the only land engagement on the Australian mainland during that period and the biggest prison break-out in history. Approximately 378 Japanese prisoners escaped outright, 234 Japanese and 5 Australians died, 108 Japanese and 4 Australians were wounded and 331 escaped for periods of up to nine days. Large areas of the camp were burnt to the ground. The break-out can be seen to reflect the varying cultural attitudes related to issues of confinement.

The Cowra POW camp site exists within a landscape that is both evocative and aesthetically pleasing. This landscape may be used to interpret the context of the camp as the site's primary historical feature. The landscape remains essentially the way it was during WWII. Although most physical evidence of the camp is gone there are scattered ruins and features.

The development and occupation of the Prisoner of War Camp was unique in the region. The events which occurred at the site have led to links being formed between Cowra and Japan which have been instrumental in affecting the form, direction and identity of the town in the post-war period. This is a process which appears to be unique in Australia.

The camp site is of cultural significance as part of the multicultural experience in Australia. The camp encompassed both internees and Prisoners of War of a wide variety of nationalities. A large number of Italians helped build areas of the camp. The POW experience of many Italians, and other nationalities, was instrumental in the migration of many families after the war .

The camp site has a particular cultural and spiritual significance to the Japanese people, as it was the focus of a break-out on 5 August 1944 and loss of life of Japanese prisoners and housed many Japanese POWs during WWII. The camp site has fostered and inspired artistic work in Australia and Japan.

There is a substantial body of archaeological and documentary evidence that enables this site as part of a national body of evidence to demonstrate the POW experience of WWII in Australia. The physical remnants, which remain in-situ, represent a technology and building method for an architectural typology which is relatively rare in Australia and which existed for a short time and for a specific purpose. The archaeological potential is there to more accurately examine the habits and lifestyle of both the guards and the prisoners within the camp

The Cowra Prisoner of War Camp was one component of a nationwide system of POW confinement and enemy alien containment that had its antecedents in WWI. During WWI Trial Bay Gaol was utilised as an internment camp and other camps were established at Holsworthy, Berrima, Jerseyville, Bourke and Fyshwick.

During 1941 Italian POWs were evacuated from Egypt and a decision was made to send captured Italians to the British Dominions. Early in April 1941 Australia became the recipient of 2000 POWs from Egypt all of whom were transferred to camps nos 7 and 8 at Hay, NSW. Hay was the first camp established during WWII, the facilities were completed in August 1940 with British Government Funds.

In May 1941 the worsening situation in Egypt led the Commonwealth Government of Australia into an agreement with Britain to "undertake to receive custody of 50 000 Prisoners of War from the middle east". Two million five hundred thousand pounds was approved by the British Military Board to cover the cost of the construction of POW accommodation in Australia and work commenced immediately on facilities for an initial 7000 POWs which were expected to arrive soon after the agreement. Although only 2000 POWs were immediately transferred to Australia, the sites for the POW camps, including Cowra, were chosen at that time. The Cowra POW camp was one of the camps purpose built for the WWII POWs; many of the other POW camps were existing army camps such as Liverpool (Holsworthy) NSW and Brighton, Tasmania.

Every State/Territory in Australia, with the exception of the Northern Territory had camps of various types. In NSW there were camps at Hay, Liverpool (Holsworthy), Berrima and Yanco in addition to Cowra. In Victoria there were camps at Murchison, Graytown, Myrtleford, Rowville and Tatura and in South Australia at Loveday. There were also camps in Queensland (Graythorne), Tasmania (Brighton) and Western Australia (Marrenup and Harvey amongst others). There were in all twenty eight camps in Australia controlled from HQ at Murchison in Victoria established for the British Military Board. In addition to these camps large numbers of lesser facilities were established in each state.

The various camps established throughout Australia contained three distinct categories of inmates; Prisoners of war (enemy soldiers), resident enemy aliens and non resident enemy aliens (merchant sailors etc). A variety of nationalities were imprisoned in Australia. They encompassed: Italians; Japanese; Finns; Romanians; Chinese; Formosans; Koreans; Indonesians; Javanese and French. The vast majority of POWs and internees in Australia were Italian.

Each camp contributed in different ways to its regional setting. Most contributed some labour to surrounding farms and stations. Cowra, predominantly a POW Camp had a relatively low local profile. The nationality of POWs also contributed to the extent and licence of their involvement with the local community. Italian POWs regularly mixed with local communities whilst the Japanese did not mix at all. These activities are in marked contrast to the use of POWs in camps overseas. The form and operation of the camps also varied at the various sites around Australia with Cowra being a strictly divided geometrical form, others such as Tatura were loosely arranged in a "village like design."

A large army training camp was also established at a different location on the Sydney Road outside Cowra in 1940 which trained some 70 000 personnel throughout WWII. In 1941 the Australian Army chose the outskirts of Cowra to establish a camp for prisoners of war. The site selected was about 2 miles north east of the town and hidden from the main road by a steeply rising hill dotted with mottled granite outcrops. On 3 sides beyond it the landscape rolled away in grassy undulations to a distant mountain rimmed horizon.

The Cowra POW Camp, known as the Number 12 Prisoner of War Group, when finally built consisted of 4 separate 17 acre camps, each designed to hold 1000

prisoners, enclosed within a 12 sided, almost circular perimeter. A thoroughfare known as Broadway, separated camps B and C on the eastern side from camps A and D on the west. A and C Compounds housed the Italian prisoners; B Compound housed the Japanese private and non-commissioned officers; and D Compound housed a mix of Japanese Officers, Formosans, Indonesian, Taiwanese and Koreans some, who had served as labourers with the Japanese Army. Each compound came to contain around 20 painted brown weatherboard accommodation huts.

Entrances to all camps were in the centre of Broadway and the only way in or out of the perimeter was through the double gates at each end of Broadway. Each end of Broadway was guarded by two towers and two sentry boxes. Surrounding each camp was a separate perimeter fence consisting of three barbed wire fences, 30 feet apart. The 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion, was responsible for guarding the prisoners. The Headquarters (HQ) area was located outside the perimeter near D compound to the south west of the site.

Although officially operating from June 1941, the first POWs (Italians) were marched into Cowra nearly four months later, on 15 October 1941. The major building program was still underway at this time and was not completed until well into 1944. Both POW and local labourers were used to complete construction, the prisoners living in tents until April 1942 when weatherboard accommodation huts became available. Delays in receiving funding and approvals for materials also caused difficulties, however around 21 huts were completed by late April 1942 with an additional 27 huts being erected in the following 5 weeks. 1 hut could accommodate 48 POWs.

By December 1942 Cowra camp held 1644 Italian, prisoners and internees, and 490 Japanese detainees. Between January 1943 and August 1944, 1,104 Japanese POWs and internees had arrived. By the end of June 1944 the camp was already overcrowded beyond its intended capacity.

The camp had its own stores, kitchen, mess huts, showers and latrines, canteen, theatre, recreation huts, barber and tailor shop, and medical and dental centres. There were large playing fields for football, baseball and other sports, and ample space for prisoners to cultivate flower and vegetable gardens.

The place is today known as the Cowra POW Camp, however during its operation it was known as a P.W. and I Group (Prisoner of War and Internment). The four compounds were at the time designated as camps and managed separately.

By the end of 1943, Japanese morale in the Camp was low. For the Japanese soldier, the reality of capture was a violation of traditional and ethical codes.

On 3 June 1944 a Korean prisoner reported a conversation in which he heard about a plan among the Japanese to attack the garrison, seize arms and ammunition and escape. As a result security was stepped up. By June of 1944 the Camp was overcrowded beyond its intended capacity and rumour of an intended break-out reached the ears of Australian military authorities. By August with rumours of mass escape circulating, the Camp Commandant decided to move all Japanese Prisoners below the rank of Lance Corporal to Hay POW Camp. This move, which under the

terms of the Geneva Convention required twenty four hours notice to POWs, was arranged for Monday 7 August 1944 and announced to Japanese leader Sergeant Major Kanazawa and others on Friday 4 August 1944.

An emergency meeting of hut leaders was held that night by Kanazawa and a decision to oppose the separation and stage an outbreak made by 2am on 5 August.

At 2am on 5 August 1944 around 1100 Japanese prisoners staged an outbreak, around 378 escaped outright and 231 Japanese and 4 Australians died (at the time), 108 Japanese and 4 Australians were wounded (3 Japanese and 1 Volunteer Defence Corp Soldier subsequently died from wounds associated with the event). Large areas of B Compound were burnt to the ground including twenty buildings and all but two sleeping huts. 334 escapees were recaptured over the following 9 days by authorities and civilians. Some escapees were killed and some committed suicide. A Military Court of Inquiry was established immediately and heard evidence continuously from 7 to 15 August 1944.

News of the extent of the outbreak was immediately suppressed and it was not until 1949, that the two Australian Privates killed 'in action' were awarded the George Cross and the number of Japanese dead was publicly revealed.

The Japanese break out at Cowra was unique in the Australian war time experience and to date nothing of the same scale and motivation has been identified elsewhere. In July 1944, an outbreak of violence occurred at Hay where several POWs were stabbed, two fatally. In June 1945 Japanese POWs rioted at Hay and a number were injured. Various violent incidents were reported throughout the country. The only comparable incident to that which occurred at Cowra happened at Featherston, New Zealand during 1943 where a group of Japanese rioted resulting in a number of deaths and injuries.

During 1945, most remaining Japanese POWs at Cowra were sent to Victoria and with the cessation of hostilities in the Pacific on 15 August 1945, POWs and Internees in Cowra and other establishments were either repatriated or freed. The repatriation of POWs was dependent on the availability of shipping which was in short supply. By the second week in January 1947 the remaining 500 Italian POWs, kept behind to pull down the barbed wire in the camp after the majority of the Italians had been shipped out, were put on a train to Sydney. The camp officially closed at the end of February 1947.

POST WWII HISTORY

The Commonwealth Disposals Commission auctioned the camp buildings along with associated miscellaneous items in March 1947. The Department of Agriculture purchased 130 acres with the official transfer occurring after November 1950 although they had occupied the land since 29 August 1948. The Department of Agriculture used the land for grazing sheep. Part of the camp land was passed into freehold and contained most of the remains of the Prisoners compound. The land in private ownership was used for grazing and crop cultivation. The camp site is now in the ownership of the Cowra Shire Council.

The break-out has remained significant in popular memory. While the number of Australian casualties and deaths brought about by the Japanese bombing raids on Darwin was significantly higher than those at Cowra, the break-out has a significant place in popular memory. The reasons for this almost legendary quality the story has achieved are complex: the breakout represented the war fought on home soil for the first time; it involved a contest between the greatly feared might of the Japanese Imperial forces and a handful of Australian reservists; it had all the drama of any other POW wartime escape but was on Australian soil; it was the largest revolt of its kind in Australia's history; and it reflected the different cultural attitudes and perceptions of confinement.

The experience of the Japanese has often overshadowed the experience of the Italian, Javanese and assorted other ethnic groups which populated the camp during its operation.

The camp and the break-out have inspired a number of literary works commencing with Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie's "Dead Men Rising" (1951); then Hugh Clarke's "Break-Out" (1965); ex Japanese POW Teruhiko Asada's "The night of a Thousand Suicides" (1967); and, a decade later, Harry Gordon's "Die Like the Carp" (1978). It continues to be the subject of books.

The camp site has links with the nearby site of the AMF camp and relates to other war related impacts, such as the women's land army which was active in the region. In a regional context the camp site and other features of the period provide a varying and unique view of Australia at war.

The camp site is important for the wide associations it has with the community particularly for ethnic or multi cultural development. It housed a wide variety of nationalities and it was the war time experience of many Prisoners of War in Australia, particularly Italians, that introduced them to the country. This was instrumental in the decisions of many families to migrate to Australia in the post war years. The influx of many and new nationalities to Australia changed the cultural development, profile and identity of the country.

In 1964 a Japanese cemetery was established at Cowra, by agreement with the Japanese government. It was designed by well known Tokyo Architect Shigeru Yura. In 1965 Cowra, and the Lachlan Valley in which it sits, held the first of a series of annual festivals of international understanding. In 1979 the town's Japanese garden was opened, designed by the renowned Tokyo Landscape Architect Ken Nakajima in a style pioneered in the 17th century. In 1992 Cowra received Australia's world peace bell. Cowra has attracted numerous official and unofficial Japanese visits; a student exchange program between Cowra and Japan established in 1970.

In 1991 Cherry Tree Avenue was extended across the perimeter of the camp on its western side to link the War Cemetery and Japanese Gardens.

DESCRIPTION

Cowra is situated approximately 300 kilometres due west of Sydney on the Mid

Western Highway. The Prisoner of War camp site is located approximately 3 kilometres north east of the township of Cowra, NSW. The site of the Cowra POW Camp covers an area of approximately 1440000sqm. The site slopes down evenly to the south east and lies within a shallow valley defined by a ring of hills. The valley provides complete visual containment of the site except for limited views out to the south east. The original entrance to the camp has been subsumed by a housing development although the gates still survive on Binni Creek Road. Access is now provided by Cherry Tree Avenue which runs across the former perimeter of the camp, splitting it from the HQ site.

Few of the former facilities survive to any great extent above ground level. Archaeological potential is high in all areas of the complex.

The POW Camp was located on gently sloping land that is separated from the town by a ridge line. The camp generally exists in a cleared setting although there has been considerable tree growth in and around many of the structural remains. None of the perimeter or internal fences, paths or structures remain to any appreciable level above ground level, although remnants of floor slabs, footings and drainage lines have been identified using aerial photographs.

Documentation has only occurred for part of the site (not including the area previously in private ownership). The visible remains include a standing building, concrete floors and piers, outlines of foundations and levelled building platforms, road and drain lines, garden borders and trees. The remains identified in this area include:

A single ruinous, but above ground structure is located at the north western end of the Headquarters' area. It comprises four walls constructed from a variety of materials including stone rubble, salvaged bricks and concrete blocks with some wood and metal incorporated into the structure. Evidence of a relatively shallow-pitched roof remains. The narrow ends have shallow gables and there are door and window openings on the western and southern sides, rendered with concrete. The materials and construction method are identical to the Camp entrance gates on Bini Creek Road. Date of construction has not been confirmed. This building has been identified as Building No.39, a petrol store.

Concrete Foundations and Floors of hospital, mess, ablution, and toilet buildings constitute the most common remains on the site. The brick and concrete foundations of a large ablution block are visible from the north west of the site and immediately in front of them are similar remains of a toilet block. Near the toilet block are two concrete floors partly concealed by grass. Specific buildings which can be identified from the survey drawings and aerial photographs are: Building 15 "Harness" small concrete slab also adjacent to the road; Building 37 "Portable Sentry Box", north of the parade ground; Building 51 the hospital in the western corner of Compound A; Ablution, laundry blocks and latrines in Compound D; Guards latrines ablution and laundry buildings (Building 12) and the temporary cells (Building 36) on the southern limit of the A and B Company areas.

A line of stones presumably arranged to demarcate a garden, pathway or road is visible. A contour plow or terrace line exists which was part of the vegetable garden

area.

Building outlines - The outlines of buildings can be detected as sparse areas of grass in some parts of the site. These outlines indicate buildings with substantial masonry foundations, but without concrete floors.

Levelled building platforms - there are several areas where the soil has been levelled to accommodate buildings but where no building remains can be seen. These more ephemeral traces of past structures and features are more likely to relate to light weight framed structures with timber floors or squared timber posts or piers cut straight from tree trunks.

Garden or path borders - several lines of stones presumably arranged to demarcate gardens, pathways or roadways have survived.

Roads - The lines of roadways are indicated by both embankments and excavations. The line of the road is clearly visible, the western edge of the roadway is indicated by a dish drain and on the east by a stone revetted embankment. The road crosses the drain on a stone culvert. The drain emerges from the embankment and is visible. A row of trees line the road at one point and run between the remains of the buildings.

Culverts and Drains - Culverts, drains, grease traps and sumps for various purposes are associated with other remains throughout the site.

Non visible remains:

Building remains - most buildings on the site were temporary or demountable and many were erected on wooden piles. These buildings are likely to have left remains but they would only be identified by archaeological excavation.

Fence lines - none of the fence lines which characterise the use of the site as a POW camp are detectable. These would also only be identified by archaeological excavation.

Services - In addition to the remains of underground services that are visible there would be a considerable network of services including water and electricity which could be detected by remote sensing or archaeological excavation. The identification of such services would be important on locating and identifying the remains of the more ephemeral buildings. At least one octagonal cistern may be found in the study area.

Historic Plantings - The Group Headquarters compound is planted with rows of peppercorn trees and rough barked eucalypts, these indicate the lines of buildings and road and are an extremely important feature of the site. They mark out the area and assist in interpretation as well as identifying the headquarters area as different from the prison compounds where there was very little vegetation or shade.

Fig trees - within the vegetable garden area there is a pair of fig trees which may survive from the period of the camp.

Two buildings from the camp remain intact off site within the district, having been sold at auction after the camp was disbanded. HQ Hut 10 (or 18) the "Wiltondale" Hut, its number may still be seen on the end wall of the hut. Hut 10 was an Administration Hut, 60 x 18. Hut 18 was 60 x 18 + 16 x 11 and was used as an Officers' and Sergeants' Mess and Kitchen. The walls are constructed of corrugated galvanised iron. The stud framing is lightweight construction and the building is unlined.

Unidentified Timber Hut: The Newlings Factory Hut - A hut located at Newling's factory it is identical in form to the "Wiltondale" hut.

Two memorials are located at the corner of Sakura Avenue and Farm Road (Evans Street). One is a memorial cairn marking the location of the Japanese Breakout at Cowra and the other is a recent memorial to the Italian POWs who were housed in the camp. An early interpretation sign also exists in this area.

The former camp site is now connected to the Australian and Japanese War cemeteries by Sakura Avenue, a five kilometre avenue of some 2000 flowering cherry trees of varying shapes, sizes and colour. A walking track provides access to part of the land. Interpretation panels have been placed at the north east of the site.

The Cowra Prisoner of War Camp (former) is included in the New South Wales Heritage Register.

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT:

In all there were 28 main POW camps utilised during WWII. A large number of lesser facilities were also established throughout Australia. A number of Camps were purpose built such as Cowra, Hay, and Marrinup and other camps used existing army properties such as at Liverpool (Holsworthy), Brighton and Murchison. Of the 28 main POW camps the Liverpool (Holsworthy) camp, NSW is included in the RNE (#014223) it was built during WWI and is still used by the army. Brighton Army Barracks, Tasmania is currently under assessment (#101851). Marrinup No 16 POW Camp, WA has been nominated to the RNE but not assessed. It like Cowra was purpose built for POW's in WWII and dismantled after the war.