

Cowra breakout, 1944

On 5 August 1944, Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) housed in the detention camp in Cowra, New South Wales staged a breakout. Armed with improvised weapons including baseball bats and sharpened mess knives, they stormed the perimeter fences and overcame the machine gun posts. Never likely to be successful, the breakout resulted in the death of 231 Japanese prisoners with a further 108 wounded. All survivors were recaptured in the surrounding countryside in the days that followed.

Four Australians were killed in the breakout – Privates Benjamin Gower Hardy, Ralph Jones and Charles Henry Shepherd. Lieutenant Harry Doncaster was killed when ambushed during the recapture of the prisoners. Hardy and Jones were posthumously awarded the George Cross.

A Military Court of Inquiry investigated the incident, and a summary of its findings was read to the House of Representatives by Prime Minister John Curtin on 8 September 1944. The summary indicated the following:

- that conditions at the camp were fully in accordance with the International Convention;
- that no complaints regarding treatment had been made by or on behalf of the Japanese prior to the incident, which appeared to have been a premeditated and concerted plan of the prisoners;
- that the actions of the Australian garrison in resisting the attack averted greater loss of life, and that firing ceased as soon as control was assured; and
- that many of the dead had died by suicide or by the hand of other prisoners, and that many of the wounded had suffered self-inflicted wounds.

Curtin's statement also noted that the attack was characterised by 'a suicidal disregard of life'.

Record holdings

A selection of the most significant records about the breakout of POWs from the Cowra camp held by the National Archives, and by the Australian War Memorial, is provided in the table below.

Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Escape of Japanese Prisoners of war from Cowra 1944</u> (includes map of camp, description of events and casualty figures)	1944	A373, 10020

<u>Prisoners of war in Australia – Japanese escape from Cowra camp, August 1944 (includes correspondence re coroner's findings)</u>	1944	A1066, IC45/32/3/2
<u>Mutiny of Japanese prisoners of war at Cowra camp (includes prime minister's statement, nominal roll of deceased POWs, and details of court of inquiry)</u>	1944	A1608, AX20/1/1
<u>Outbreak of Japanese prisoners of war at Cowra (includes prime minister's statement and press cuttings)</u>	1944	A5954, 674/7
<u>History – Directorate of Prisoners of War and Internees – The Cowra Incident (Chapter 22) – important events (includes results of court of inquiry and coronial inquiries)</u>	1944	A7711, volume 1
<u>Cowra Camp – prisoners of war – Japanese escapees (includes Prime Minister's statement)</u>	1944	SP112/1, M 57
<u>Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph (Sydney) – breach of censorship regulations by the press on publishing details re the breakout (includes original press article and a legal opinion)</u>	1944	SP195/1, 73/23/32
<u>Repatriation Act 1920–63 – theatre of war – Cowra POW outbreak – Captain PP Smyth entitlement (includes legal opinion re compensation)</u>	1964	A432, 1964/3179
<u>Archival arrangements and request for access – HA Gordon – Cowra POW camp outbreak (includes nominal roll of deceased POWs)</u>	1964–68	A1838, 1270/7/30

Sydney

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 1
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 2
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 3
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 4
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 5
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 6
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 7
<u>Japanese Cowra trials</u>	1944–45	SP196/1, 1 part 8
<u>Burials – prisoners of war – Cowra War Cemetery</u>	1944	SP459/1, 445/1/6640
<u>Administrative instructions, general correspondence, signals etc – Japanese prisoners of war outbreak, Cowra</u>	1944	SP1048/7, S56/2/1094
<u>Proceedings of a court of inquiry into the search for and recapture of certain prisoners of war who escaped from Cowra POW camp on 5 August 1944, and the death of Lieutenant Harry Doncaster</u>	1944	SP1048/7, S56/2/1125
<u>Japanese prisoner of war outbreak, Cowra, 1944</u>	1944	SP1048/7, S56/2/1302
<u>Cowra internment camp</u>	1944	SP1714/1, N45633 part 6

Melbourne

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Cowra mass escape</u>	1944	B2944
<u>Photographs of the Cowra mass escape</u>	1944	B5458
<u>Cowra POW camp – Department of War Graves Services report on attempted mass escape by Japanese POWs and subsequent death toll</u>	1944	MP742/1, 132/1/211A
<u>Disturbance at Cowra POW camp</u>	1944	MP742/1, 255/15/375

Australian War Memorial, Canberra

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Nominal roll of Japanese buried at Cowra Japanese cemetery</u>	1944	AWM54, 780/1/7
<u>Findings of a court of inquiry on the mass escape of Japanese prisoners of war, Cowra NSW, including nominal roll of deceased Japanese prisoners of war</u>	1944	AWM54, 780/10/3B
<u>Findings of a court of inquiry on the mass escape of Japanese prisoners of war, Cowra NSW, including nominal roll of deceased Japanese prisoners of war</u>	1944	AWM54, 780/10/3C