

## Abstract

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This paper reconsiders the Cowra Breakout, a massive and suicidal uprising that occurred on August 5, 1944 in B Camp, Cowra Internment and Prisoner of War Camp, Australia, from a perspective of “daily lives” of a maximum of 1,104 Japanese Prisoners of War (POWs) who participated in the event.

During World War II, Imperial Japanese Army claimed that being a POW was a sheer shame and that a soldier had to kill himself before being captured. Due to such Army education, the majority of former POWs have kept silent even after the war, therefore the Cowra Breakout and their personal experiences have not properly been told or noticed in Japan’s modern military history. The author attempts to reconsider the cause and the meaning of the breakout through those Japanese POWs’ bodies, living places and materiality in their daily lives.

The research is based on Australia’s wartime official government documents, newspapers and Japanese war chronicles. However, the essential part of the research places reliance on the author’s interviews with former Japanese POWs that have been conducted between 1993 and 2014.

The composition of the paper is as follows:

In the introductory chapter, first the author’s 21-year involvement with the studies of the Cowra Breakout is introduced, then the purpose and method of the research, such as life story interview, is explained.

Chapter 1 discusses how Japanese young men’s bodies were radically and brutally modified to fit the military life through daily violence called “informal sanction (*Shiteki Seisa*)”. The history of Japanese treatment of prisoners is also discussed.

Chapter 2 examines the policy and treatment of the POWs by Australia who acted in accordance with the international law.

In Chapter 3, the nominal list of 231 Japanese POWs who lost their lives in the breakout, created by the author based on several sources, is presented. This original list contains each prisoner’s date and place of birth, military rank, occupation in Japan, marital status, captured date (and age), captured place, physical condition when captured, height and weight measured after being captured, BMI, arrival date at Cowra Camp (and age) and cause of death (and age). Their previously unknown physical characteristics can be identified through the newly compiled list. The list clearly shows that the majority of Japanese POWs who lost their lives during the breakout were Army

Other Ranks who were captured in and around New Guinea.

Chapter 4 illustrates specific daily lives in the Cowra Camp, narrated by former Japanese POWs. Their new POW life was “heaven” filled with Western clothes, abundant food, free time, gambling and no forced labor; exactly opposite of “hell” that they experienced in New Guinea. Their bodies, which experienced close encounters with death in New Guinea, became overwhelmed by the excessive energy that evolved in the camp. Many became absorbed in playing or watching female roles (*Onnagata*) in the theater performances. Changes in their views over their bodies, especially associated with gender issues, are also indicated.

In Chapter 5, the details of the circumstances during the breakout are thoroughly narrated through the former POWs’ recollections. The author attempts to replay on paper the specific and exact backdrop of the camp at the time of the breakout, based on the recollections of the survivors of the breakout. Past researches have suggested that the main aim of the Cowra Breakout was to commit suicide. However, the author’s interviews point out that some Japanese soldiers seriously attempted to escape, meaning that there were POWs whose characteristics differed from the stereotypical Japanese POW.

Chapter 6 explains the environment and mood of the camp immediately after the breakout, as well as the possibility of Japanese officers’ involvement in the incident. The B Camp leader formally stated that the underlying cause of the incident was the shame of being a prisoner while the direct cause was the order given prior to the breakout to separate soldiers from non-commissioned officers. In reality, however, a confidential letter had been delivered to the B Camp leader from the captive Japanese officers in D Camp, which might have had a great influence over the B Camp leader’s charge.

In Chapter 7, Japanese POWs’ new daily lives after the destructive incident are explained. After the breakout, non-commissioned officers were sent to Murchison Camp and the soldiers to Hay Camp. Here, the paper focuses on two prisoners: a non-commissioned officer who joined a drama club in the new camp and played an *Onnagata* (a female role), and a soldier that was ordered to stay in Cowra due to Hansen’s disease and began making handicrafts. The two quickly accepted the changes and became absorbed by their new daily lives.

Chapter 8 focuses on the former POWs who returned to their homes in Japan after the war, through their activities in the “comrades associations” such as *Goshu Cowra Kai* and *Murchison Kai*. *Goshu Cowra Kai* acted as the main advocate for the Cowra Breakout. It should be noted that all eight of the successive presidents of *Goshu Cowra Kai* had survived the breakout without a single injury, and a third of the members have

not experienced the event at all. This gap between those who experienced the breakout and those who did not can also be noticed in *Murchison Kai*.

The last chapter is the conclusion of this paper. Here, it points out that the Cowra Breakout had occurred under the extreme changes of situations: an ultimate experience of war that reverses extraordinary to ordinary, abnormal to normal. The breakout occurred in the midst of such a cataclysmic time. Many of the former POWs have lived the rest of their lives as a “former POW” and that fact was never wiped off all through their lives. At the same time, their male homosocial bond maintained over a prolonged period of time after the war.

Previous to this paper, the causes of the Cowra Breakout have usually been approached only through the mentality as typified by “*Senjinkun Military Code*”. This paper, however, attempts to approach the event from another perspective i.e. physicality in search for a new dimension of reality. Though the Cowra Breakout is a singular event in modern history, it offers some timeless implications over war, soldiers, masculinity and Japanese society at large.