

## Breaking barriers

### The diversity of prisoner-of-war camps in Japan and Australian contacts with Japanese civilians

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Many generalisations and stereotypes persist regarding the experiences of Australian prisoners of the Japanese. The events on the Thai–Burma railway have become so ingrained in popular memory that they seem representative of the entire experience of those imprisoned by the Japanese.<sup>1</sup> However, each prison camp was different; the conditions and the attitudes of camp commanders and guards were not uniform, and this could lead to quite diverse experiences. In many ways each of the 22 000 Australians who became prisoners of the Japanese has a unique story to tell depending on their own journey through captivity. In some places—Sandakan, Burma, Thailand and Ambon—conditions and treatment of prisoners were truly horrendous. But conditions in other camps could be better—Changi is the prime example—with relatively few deaths taking place. Of the 87 000 prisoners of war who passed through Changi, 850 died there.<sup>2</sup>

Most attention has been given by historians to places and events in which conditions were the worst. Nelson has ascribed this to a fascination with the extreme suffering in these locations. Not

only do they provide gripping stories but also the harsh and brutal treatment requires explanation. The focus on the extreme, however, fails to demonstrate the complexities and diversity that existed in camps across Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas much has been written about the Thai–Burma railway, Changi and Sandakan, historians have largely overlooked the experience of Australian prisoners of war who journeyed to Japan. Their stories, if featured at all, tend to appear almost as a footnote or afterthought following the completion of the railway. However, not only do the camps in Japan illustrate how diverse were the experiences of prisoners but also they brought Australians into contact with ordinary Japanese civilians—Japanese who were not members of the military.

### The prisoner-of-war experience in popular memory and camps in Japan

The relegation of the story of imprisonment in Japan to the lower reaches of popular memory is not surprising. The two major waves of prisoner-of-war writing came in the post-war period and then on the back of the memory boom in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> From the many titles during these periods the ones that made the biggest impact and had the greatest commercial success were Rohan Rivett's *Behind Bamboo* (1946), Russell Braddon's *Naked Island* (1952), Betty Jeffrey's *White Coolies* (1954), Stan Arneil's *One Man's War* (1980) and Edward 'Weary' Dunlop's *War Diaries of Weary Dunlop* (1986).<sup>5</sup> All of these authors but Jeffrey worked on the railway, and none went on to Japan. It is worth noting, too, that a divide opened up in Changi between those who had been to the railway and those who had not. This may have gone some way to silencing the story of those with perceived 'cushy jobs' elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

For many prisoners who worked in Japan, their captivity can be almost evenly broken down into three parts: the first year of captivity was spent in Singapore or Java, the second year was involved working on the railway, and the final year was spent in Japan. Hence, Japan becomes something of a third act rather than just an epilogue—as exemplified by Ray Parkin's trilogy.<sup>7</sup> A recent example of the dominance of the Changi–railway narrative is historian Peter Brune's 2014 *Descent Into Hell: The Fall of Singapore—Pudu and Changi—The*

*Thai-Burma Railway*. Commendable for its willingness to provide a narrative of both the Malayan campaign as well as captivity, Brune's tome comes to an abrupt end when the work parties begin arriving back in Changi from Thailand in December 1943.<sup>8</sup> Some of those interviewed by Brune, and those whose diaries or papers he cites, went on to Japan, but this significant part of their story is not covered.

Similarly, the visual documentation of the prisoner-of-war experience is also heavily focused on Changi and the Thai-Burma railway. Many of the key titles in the historiography of captivity are illustrated with photographs taken by George Aspinall, who managed to smuggle his camera with him when drafted to Thailand into F Force, or artworks by official war artist Murray Griffin, the only artist in the history of the official war artist scheme to be a prisoner of war.<sup>9</sup> Aspinall's images of conditions at Songkurai camp in Thailand are almost a standard inclusion in publications on prisoners of the Japanese.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Aspinall, Murray Griffin did not go to the railway; he remained in Changi, where he created artworks based on eyewitness accounts by survivors. When news broke at the end of the war that he was returning to Australia with almost two hundred illustrations there was great eagerness to see his works.<sup>11</sup> By the time Griffin's exhibition toured Australia in 1946-47, the suffering of the prisoners had been made well known in the press, and audiences came in their thousands to see the artist's impressions. In Adelaide in January 1947, in just a fortnight, 17 000 people came to see Griffin's works. Some 3000 people attended on a single day, and the catalogue sold out multiple times.<sup>12</sup>

Supplementing those images produced by prisoners are hundreds of photos taken by the Department of Information and Australian press photographers following the liberation of Changi, documenting, reproducing and re-enacting camp life.<sup>13</sup> Again, these photographs, particularly those of skeletal men convalescing in hospital wards, have been widely published, and have played a key role in shaping popular memory of the prisoner-of-war experience in Asia.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the visual record of prisoner-of-war camps in Japan is relatively poor. Prisoners and their meagre packs containing their possessions were searched before the ocean voyage and ensured that no hidden cameras were taken with them from Singapore, the official artist remained in Changi and, unlike in Singapore following

liberation, there were few press photographers on hand to provide a strong visual record of camps in Japan.

Not only is the visual and literary record of prisoners in Japan weaker but also consideration must be given to the weight of numbers. Whereas 2815 of the 13 000 Australian prisoners in Burma and Thailand died—a rate of 21.65 per cent—prisoners in Japan had a much better chance of survival.<sup>15</sup> Of the more than 4000 prisoners held in Japan, a relatively low figure of 190—about 4.75 per cent—died in captivity.<sup>16</sup>

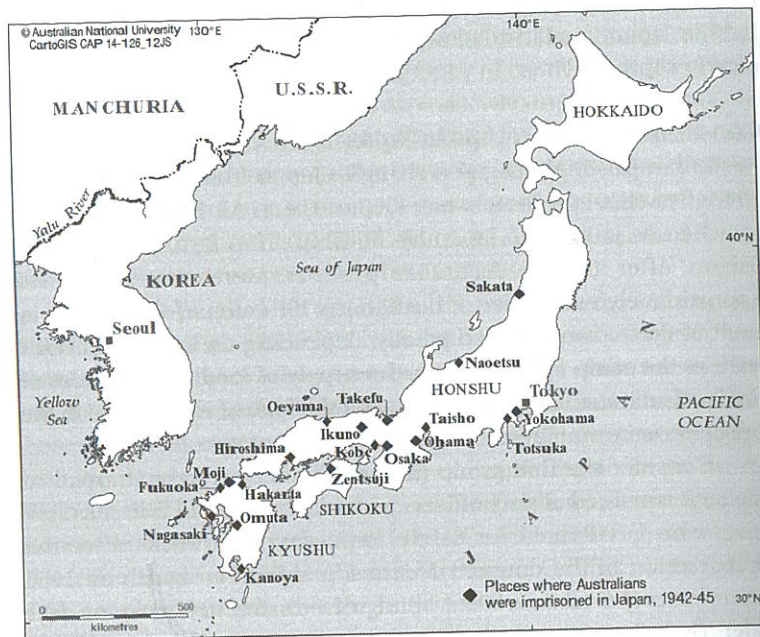
### Conditions across camps in Japan

Australian prisoners began arriving in Japan from as early as July 1942. By war's end there were 4000 of them. All had endured the treacherous journey to Japan by 'hellship' from Java, Singapore or Saigon. After arriving, Australian prisoners were scattered across approximately twenty-five of the nation's 130 camps.<sup>17</sup> Conditions in each of these camps varied greatly, depending on local conditions such as the camp infrastructure, the supply of food, the attitudes of the local commandant and guards, and the type of work in which the prisoners were employed.

Consider the first group of Australians who were shipped to Japan. It consisted of sixty officers, six army nurses and thirteen civilians, who left Rabaul on 6 July 1942—just two weeks after the embarkation of the doomed *Montevideo Maru*, on which all 1053 prisoners on board were killed—and arrived safely in Japan nine days later. Their first six weeks in Japan were spent at the Yokohama Yacht Club, after which the nurses were sent to the Totsuka Internment Camp and the officers were sent to Zentsuji (Hiroshima I-B) camp. At Zentsuji, mail from home arrived regularly and Red Cross parcels—at first—arrived on at least a monthly basis. Conditions worsened at the camp in the first half of 1944, and that June forty-five of the Australian officers were moved to Nishi Ashibetsu (Hakodate 4-B) on Hokkaido Island, where they worked at a coal mine until the end of the war. None of this first party died as a prisoner of war in Japan.<sup>18</sup>

The next significant workforce to arrive in Japan was C Force. Departing Singapore on 28 November 1942, this 2200-strong party included 563 Australian prisoners. Arriving in Japan on 8 December,

the Australians were split into two groups, with half going to the camp at Naoetsu (Tokyo 4-B) and the rest to the Kawasaki Ogimachi (Tokyo 2-B) camp. The Kawasaki Ogimachi camp was new and reasonably well equipped, and the prisoners were put to work at a nearby wharf. Of the 263 Australians of C Force who went to the Kawasaki camp, just four died.<sup>19</sup>



Map 12.1: Prisoner-of-war camps, Japan, 1942-45

In sharp contrast, conditions facing the three hundred who went to the camp at Naoetsu were bleak. While all prisoners suffered from the change in climate from the Singapore tropics to the mid-winter cold of the northern latitudes, the camp guards at Naoetsu were particularly cruel. At first the camp commander had impressed the prisoners with his leniency and capability, but when he was replaced in February, beatings and bashings became common and rations were at a starvation level. The men worked at a factory a mile from the camp and were forced by the guards to run to and from work. On occasion men worked twelve- and eighteen-hour shifts for as long as 110 days without a break.<sup>20</sup> Some men worked outdoors at

a chemical factory, where they spent the day breaking rocks with sledge hammers. Corporal Maxwell Hopson of the 2/18th Battalion wrote in his diary that life was a 'living hell':

We were treated like animals and any small trouble such as breaking a dish we would be stood in the cold for hours with a bag over our head, belted for ignorant mistakes, dragged out of bed during night in [the] snow [and] made to bash each other, run back through snow after a hard day's work and food only fit for dogs.<sup>21</sup>



Prisoners of war and camp guards at Naoetsu, the worst camp encountered by Australians in Japan, probably at Christmas 1942. Sixty of the three hundred Australians at Naoetsu died, a rate of survival comparable to many camps along the Thai-Burma railway. (AWM P00142.003)

On one night, Hopson wrote, the guards dragged the men out of the barracks and made them crawl around in the snow in a large circle. They beat the prisoners, verbally abused them, and threw buckets of water on those who collapsed. Having been kept up all night and without food, the prisoners were sent straight to work the next morning. 'We were given no peace and life was miserable and many collapsed on the job then would be beat[en] and kick[ed].'<sup>22</sup>

The senior Australian officer in the camp, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew E. Robertson, died of meningitis in Naoetsu, but in the two months before his death was forced to run four miles a day.<sup>23</sup> Eight guards in the camp were later tried for war crimes and sentenced to death by hanging. A total of sixty Australians died at Naoetsu, or about 20 per cent of the three hundred who entered the camp, a rate of survival comparable to many camps along the Thai–Burma railway.<sup>24</sup>

By means of contrast, at other camps no prisoners had died, or the rates of death were as low as a few per cent. Therefore, in these simple terms, where Naoetsu represents the extreme, at other camps in Japan the rates of death are comparable to those of Australian and British prisoners of the Germans in World War II.<sup>25</sup>

In Japan, Australian prisoners of war also found themselves in camps run on a different system from that to which they had become accustomed under Australian and British leadership. Omuta (Fukuoka 17-B) camp housed 1700 Australian, British, Dutch and American prisoners of war, and by the time the Australians arrived the Americans had already been in the camp for some time. The Americans therefore held all the best jobs, such as in the kitchen and hospital, which meant that the latecomers had to work in the nearby coal mine. Moreover, whereas in Changi, the Australian and British officers had run the camp and enforced strict discipline to help quell black-market activities (see chapter 9), in Omuta the newly arrived prisoners found a capitalist camp system that the Americans had brought with them from the Philippines. It was an arrangement previously unknown to the Australian and British prisoners. The issuing of IOUs had been banned in Changi and strict measures had been emplaced in an attempt to thwart black-market activities.<sup>26</sup> But in Omuta, not only were prisoners allowed to sell food and other items (barred in Changi) but they could also trade their food with interest. Men could even file for bankruptcy. Furthermore, while petty theft had been a problem among prisoners at Changi from as early as February 1942, in Omuta it was endemic. Clothes had to be watched as they dried on washing lines to prevent them being stolen, and a prisoner had to keep a sharp eye on his food in the mess at all times. It was said that a prisoner could not even take a few steps from the table to fill his mug with water without his meal being stolen. There were occasions at Omuta, too, where caught thieves were

handed over to Japanese authorities by their American commanders, where they faced torture (and, in the case of one offender, death).<sup>27</sup> As unpopular as Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick 'Black Jack' Galleghan and other senior officers in Changi may have been among other ranks, this was certainly something they had never done. The motivation in Changi to maintain strong discipline had been there precisely to better protect the prisoners from Japanese repercussions.<sup>28</sup>

### Contact with Japanese civilians

One of the most significant experiences for Australians in Japan was their meeting ordinary Japanese citizens. This is especially important since one of the legacies of the war against Japan is assumed to be the confirmation of earlier fears of the 'yellow peril' and the supposedly barbaric nature of Asiatic races.<sup>29</sup> Fuelled on both sides by propaganda that dehumanised the enemy, the Pacific War came to be characterised by its ferocity and vicious cycle of violence. This racial propaganda contributed immensely to the psychological distancing that facilitated killing.<sup>30</sup>

For soldiers on the front lines, the experience of combat had often reinforced stereotypes. Language, propaganda and cultural differences were hard to overcome, making it difficult for Australian soldiers to understand their enemy. When fighting in the islands, therefore, they often described Japanese soldiers in animalistic terms: as apes, rats or vermin.<sup>31</sup> At one end of the spectrum was the Commander in Chief of the Australian Military Forces, General Sir Thomas Blamey, who during the fighting around Buna in late 1942 and early 1943 told troops that 'beneath the thin veneer of a few generations of civilization he is a sub-human beast, who has brought warfare back to the primeval'.<sup>32</sup> However, as Mark Johnston has noted, it cannot be assumed that Australian soldiers swallowed propaganda fed by the likes of Blamey since many did not consider their senior commander as 'an oracle of wisdom'.<sup>33</sup> Such are the complexities of war that, as well as being an intense source of hatred, Japanese soldiers' bravery, toughness and ability to endure appalling conditions were also held in respect by Australian soldiers—even by some prisoners of war.<sup>34</sup>

The same mix of attitudes was evident among Australian prisoners of war. The memoirs by Braddon and Rivett tended, as Robin

Gerster has stated, to 'spread the gospel of Japanese barbarism with a passion'.<sup>35</sup> Such works excited readers with tales of atrocities, massacres, starvation, disease, skeletal figures and death. But the prisoners who went to Japan found themselves in contact with Japanese civilians, those who were not wearing the uniforms of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) or Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN).

Across Japan, prisoners worked in factories, foundries, mines and dockyards. In most locations the camp guards would escort them to their places of work and then hand them over to those who would supervise them during working hours. At the dockyards at Nagasaki this meant the Japanese navy and *kempeitai*. Here the workers were kept on a tight rein, and beatings were not uncommon.<sup>36</sup> At the Yoshiwara Vegetable Oil Company factory in the suburbs of Kobe, supervisors were made up of factory security police. Some of these—usually old veterans—turned a blind eye to the prisoners' pilfering of supplies, mostly because the guards benefited directly from it by later trading with the prisoners for the stolen goods. By this time Japan had been devastated by the US naval blockade, and daily goods produced in the factory, such as cooking oil, were not widely available to ordinary Japanese citizens.<sup>37</sup> The guards therefore would encourage the prisoners to steal, and would even direct and show them where 'loot' was stored, on the condition that it was understood that the guards would not be able to intervene if the prisoner were caught red-handed by the *kempeitai*.<sup>38</sup>

Australian prisoners of war also found themselves working alongside ordinary Japanese civilians. In some workplaces a standard team of five was made up of two or three Japanese civilians and two or three prisoners. Some prisoners considered that the civilians with whom they worked 'were just as bad as the guards'.<sup>39</sup> One prisoner felt that the Omuta Camp and work in the nearby Miike coal mine were the worst conditions he faced, even worse than on the railway. The guards were brutal, he said, and the Japanese civilians they worked alongside, too old or unfit for military service, 'were the boss and let us know. The kicking, the hitting, the shouting—it was a living hell inside the blasted coal mine.'<sup>40</sup>

But conditions could be different. Where most of the prisoners at the Ohashi camp (Sendai 4-B) worked in mines, Corporal William Edmonds of No 1 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, was tasked

with repairing engines in a small workshop, apparently under little supervision. At first he found it a strain on the nerves with the Japanese boss 'yelling and shouting at us all the time', but shortly after his arrival a new boss, whom he called 'the old man', took over the workshop and things got better. On 25 April 1943 Edmonds wrote in his diary: '[N]o work at all new boss is good, he gave me a rice cake and half of his *bento* [box] for dinner. I felt so full I could not move for 2 hours.' Several months later he wrote that there was 'nothing much doing' in the shop, and a few days later: '[S]ame again ... Just doing odd jobs, the old man was out most of the day, so bludged a fair bit.' Back at camp it was a different matter. The guards there were, he considered, the worst they had had, and beatings were common.<sup>41</sup>

In some places prisoners could not fail but note the poor conditions in which ordinary Japanese workers toiled on a daily basis. On the docks at Nagasaki children as young as five worked until 5pm before attending school late into the evening, and middle-aged women carried heavy pieces of scrap all day long.<sup>42</sup> One group of prisoners who arrived in Moji mid-winter in 1945 noted that none of the women and children had adequate winter clothing. Overcoats—it became clear—were worn only by men in the military or factory foremen.<sup>43</sup>

What may seem extraordinary is that in some workplaces, there was a camaraderie between the Australians and Japanese, comparable to the special bonds between Australians. At a Toyo Steel foundry in the suburbs of Kobe the civilian workers made sure that the same prisoners of war were on their work gangs each day. Each morning they would wait for the arrival of the prisoners and signal to their regulars to join them. One foreman regularly brought the Australian prisoners in his team something extra to supplement their midday meal. Such small gestures could make a big difference for a prisoner suffering vitamin deficiencies, malaria, pneumonia and pleurisy.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, working at the Besshi copper mine, Miggins described the old retired miner in charge of them: 'He was a kindly man and treated us very well. He often gave us small amounts of tobacco to smoke.'<sup>45</sup> Elsewhere, an Australian prisoner who worked at a chemical factory reflected that his life was saved by three Japanese women with whom he worked, who not only brought him food but also showed him how to find good seaweed to eat and

cook.<sup>46</sup> Further challenging the common view of wartime relations between Australian prisoners and the Japanese, Ray Tyrell, who shared a meal with the manager of the mine at which he worked in Hokkaido, noted: 'You wouldn't meet a nicer man on a month of Sundays.'<sup>47</sup>



*Australian and other Allied prisoners of war retrieve drums of supplies dropped by American aircraft on Kobe, Japan, in August 1945. Some Australian prisoners shared the food they received in these airdrops with Japanese civilians. (AWM P02597.021)*

At Sakata (Sendai 9-B) most of the twenty-nine Australian prisoners worked at the Nippon Tsun factory. The civilian employees here generally treated the prisoners poorly, but the company also employed a civilian medical orderly, Yuzo Matsumoto, who worked with the British and Australian medical officers. Rowley Richards, the medical officer of the 2/15th Field Regiment, stated that Matsumoto—whom he considered a friend—did his utmost to supply the medical supplies required for the prisoners and regularly shared his *bento* (lunch box) of rice, fish and vegetables with

prisoner-of-war patients. This was all done at great personal risk.<sup>48</sup> At Sakata, meanwhile, three Australian prisoners—cattleman and butchers by trade—worked for the local butcher, a man named Chukichi Takahashi. When quartering carcasses for the four retail outlets in the town, Takahashi would conceal under his bench some cuts and give them to the prisoners, who would then smuggle the forbidden meat back to the camp where it would be shared among the hospital patients. In thanks, when the war had finished and the ex-prisoners were leaving Sakata, many exchanged gifts and gave goods they had received from Red Cross parcels to Matsumoto and Takahashi.<sup>49</sup>

Accidents on work sites were common and affected all workers. A collapsed mine, a fallen scaffold, even American aerial bombing, were all indiscriminate, and could maim or kill prisoners and civilians alike.<sup>50</sup> One group of Australian prisoners following their arrival in Japan were excited to see their very first coal mine. However, all enthusiasm soon vanished as a train on the railway line at the top of a tunnel pulled up, and from it stepped two Japanese miners carrying the bloodied and 'broken body' of another on a stretch of canvas. If this could happen to Japanese workers, the prisoners wondered, their own prospects were not great.<sup>51</sup>

When the occasion required, some prisoners in Japan did what they could to help the Japanese around them. When bad weather and rough seas hit the Ohamagumi firm at Kobe dockyards, where the prisoners were lumping goods from barges on the wharf to nearby warehouses, Albert Armstrong of the 2/26th Battalion dived into the waves and saved a fellow female worker who slipped from a barge from drowning.<sup>52</sup> Following the American bombing of Kobe on 5 June 1945, the Australian prisoners reached out to aid the 'terror-stricken and shocked' civilians. By this stage bombing raids had destroyed 51 per cent of the city, and the prisoners voluntarily carried the young and old to places of safety, while their medical officers and orderlies did what they could for the injured, even drawing upon their own meagre medical resources.<sup>53</sup>

One example of humanitarianism is that of Tom Uren (later a minister in the Whitlam and Hawke governments). Captured on Timor with the 2/40th Battalion and imprisoned in Java before being sent to work on the Thai-Burma railway, he was put to work in a

Japanese copper-smelting plant, where he worked alongside Korean indentured labourers and old Japanese workers. There he witnessed the compassion of one human being to another. Unlike the prison camp guards he had encountered on the railway, he found the Japanese workers 'comradely' and 'decent people'. This helped to change his attitude towards the Japanese. The factory workers—prisoners, Japanese and Koreans alike—worked together and bathed together, and Uren shared the only Red Cross parcel he received during his time as a prisoner with his fellow Japanese and Korean workers, realising that it was not the Japanese people who were the enemy, *per se*, but rather Japanese militarism.<sup>54</sup>

From the records available it seems that Uren's actions were not unusual among prisoners working in Japan. Rowley Richards recalled similar scenes in which prisoners shared their only Red Cross parcels with local civilians on Christmas Day 1944 at Sakata.<sup>55</sup> Also, when food supply drops parachuted into camps at war's end, such acts were repeated. Announcing the end of the war in a speech to the assembled prisoners at Nakama Camp (Fukuoka 21-B), Hiraishi Hiroki, the camp commandant, made special mention that:

several days ago at one camp the prisoners presented the camp staff and factory foreman with part of their valuable food relief stuffs and personal belongings, while at other camps, prisoners have asked permission to present civilian war sufferers with their personal belongings. This I know is an expression of your understanding and open-heartedness gentlemanliness and we, the camp staff, are deeply moved.<sup>56</sup>

While the prisoners noted that a *volte face* took place among many guards and camp commanders at the end of hostilities, the sentiments expressed in this exchange appear to be sincere. At this camp only five prisoners died, in sharp contrast with other camps in the Fukuoka district, where in some cases the death toll had been over one hundred.<sup>57</sup>

It seems therefore that prisoners in Japan were able to distinguish between members of the Japanese military—their captors, who

had caused much hardship and trauma—and the ordinary Japanese civilian.<sup>58</sup> This became evident to a group of prisoners of J Force shortly after their arrival in Japan in 1943. One morning, when they were travelling on the Kobe metro from their camp to the factory in which they worked, a Japanese woman was over-anxious to board a train before all the passengers had alighted. For her impatience and audacity, the Japanese guard escorting the prisoners punched her in the face—two or three times—smashing her glasses. She was not the only woman the prisoners witnessed being assaulted by their IJA guards while travelling the metro. They also witnessed their guards giving a Japanese businessman 'the biggest belting that they had seen' on the train platform. One prisoner wrote in his diary that in these journeys he 'witnessed the supremacy of the [Imperial Japanese] Army, or rather the way that the Army maintained its supremacy in Japanese society'.<sup>59</sup> It was apparent that the ordinary Japanese citizen was as much under the thumb of the Japanese military as were the prisoners of war, and throughout their journeys the Australian prisoners observed the regimentation and 'inculcating [of] militarism into the youth of the country'.<sup>60</sup>

When the war finished this distinction became further evident for the now ex-prisoners. When guards at the Ohama camp (Hiroshima 9-B) issued Red Cross parcels labelled 'Detroit Branch, Red Cross Society of USA, Yokohama Earthquake Fund 1923', it was clear that not only had these parcels been withheld from the prisoners but also they had clearly been denied to the Japanese people.<sup>61</sup>

Such contemporary observations by prisoners in Japan were affirmed by ex-prisoners in later years. As Charles Edwards, a member of the 2/19th Battalion, told an ABC reporter in 2013 following his first visit to Japan since the war: 'The Japanese people were so beautiful, and they still are. They're courteous, kind, they laugh a lot—so my opinion of the Japanese people has never altered. It was only the IJA—the Imperial Japanese Army—that were brutal to us'.<sup>62</sup>

Such feelings could be reciprocal. Years after the war, Japanese foreman Inoue Ichiji wrote to the Australian prisoners he had worked alongside at the Hitachi Shipbuilding Yard in Osaka (they had exchanged addresses at war's end). In a letter to Pierre Walton he wrote:

Often I remember your warm and cordial welcome given to me around August 20th of the year of the Japanese surrender 1945 when I went to see you at Chikubu of Fukui Prefecture. I express my hearty thanks once again for your many nice presents such as tobacco, canned goods, chocolate and coffee. I asked you then to write your addresses for me, promising to write you after your return.

Now and then we talk about you; Because of very little rations of food we took pity on you while you were at the Hitachi Shipbuilding Yard. So consulting my wife sometimes I gave to you rice-balls and Japanese porridges, and I got many thanks from you. When No 64, Mr. Merrie [another Australian POW], had a high fever suffering bad coughs, I ventured to allow him to take rest in a warehouse without the knowledge of the authorities, giving to him the next day the medicine I brought from my friend doctor, and whether it worked wonders or not, he was restored to health. Another thing fresh in my memory is that No 90 was full of fun and mischief. I felt as if separated from a lover when you started on board a tram-car from Taisho Camp to Chikubu.<sup>63</sup>

Such correspondence does not fit with the popular understanding of wartime encounters between Australians and the Japanese.

Later reflecting upon why prisoners 'could possibly interact socially with Japanese civilians after experiencing so much suffering at the hands of their nation', Richards felt the reason was simple: kindness was 'a quality that could be found in any fellow human being. Empathy is equally universal.' With so many civilians—and particularly children—visibly suffering, most of the prisoners, he said, 'followed the simple philosophy of do unto others as you would be done by'. When civilians were caring, the prisoners responded, and vice versa, and in these fleeting moments it reminded them of a better world.<sup>64</sup>

### Accommodating the past

Despite the complexity of wartime encounters, in the post-war years, the Australian press adopted a less subtle tone. The outrage and

vengeful nature of the coverage of captivity after 1945 helped reinforce the hatred expressed in wartime racial propaganda and may well have galvanised attitudes and perceptions of Asians among the wider general public into the post-war era.<sup>65</sup> The complexities and diversity of the prisoner-of-war experience were elided. One former prisoner, Robert Fitzsimons, wrote to his brother in September 1945 stating the papers were 'trying to stir up enmity' against the Japanese. While he confirmed that some of the stories were true, he felt only one side was being told. Within the prison camps, he told his brother, were 'good and bad' Japanese.<sup>66</sup> Other veterans also strongly resented what one called 'the diet of hate' being churned out by the press.<sup>67</sup>

There were and are prisoners of war—or the families of prisoners—who were unable to forgive or forget.<sup>68</sup> The difficulties in forging an accommodation with the past were evident for Kenneth Munro. Within months of returning home, feeling rather aimless and drinking heavily, he decided to write down—warts and all—all that had happened to him from his capture on Singapore to his eventual liberation in Japan. At the beginning he expressed pity for 90 per cent of the Japanese people, despite being taught since childhood to hate the Japanese. When the war finished and he had seen the burnt-out cities, he like many others distributed among Japanese civilians the food he received from American supply drops. However, on completing his manuscript, in which he had recalled all that had happened to him over the previous four years, Munro rescinded his original feelings of pity, instead stating that these feelings were made in the exaltation of remembering the moments following liberation. He concluded that he did, after all, hate the Japanese.<sup>69</sup>

The prisoner unable to forgive or forget, or even to profess immense hatred of his former adversary, is a common typecast, but the experiences of prisoners of war and their engagement with the people of Asia were far more dynamic, far more complex. In a large survey recently conducted among veterans and families affected by the war, a majority, including half of the ex-prisoners surveyed, proclaimed to carry no anti-Japanese sentiment.<sup>70</sup> Some had mellowed in their views or changed attitudes over the decades since the war, but, as we have seen from the evidence detailed here, some had formed their opinions much earlier. Undeniably, prisoners of war—even if representing a minority of veterans or the Australian



community at large—were among the first to break down barriers.<sup>71</sup> For these reasons the cordial contacts between ordinary Australian soldiers and Asian communities—including ordinary Japanese citizens—during World War II are significant, for they go against the grain of how people generally view the attitudes toward Asia of returned prisoners.

Perhaps, as Allan Chick, an ex-prisoner who returned to Japan with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force and later married a Japanese nurse, pointed out in a letter home to his mother: 'It's a funny thing but the people back home who never actually contacted the Nips are more hostile than the chaps who fought them.'<sup>72</sup> Such feelings were familiar to fellow ex-prisoner Kenneth Harrison, who held such admiration that he proclaimed in his memoir that 'if there is another war and if I have to fight again, I would like my fellow Australians around me, and a Japanese battalion on my left and a Japanese battalion on my right.' Harrison has said that his post-war attitudes toward the Japanese strained relations with the families and friends of fellow prisoners.<sup>73</sup>

These suggestions by Chick and Harrison raise a question about negative postwar attitudes toward Japan that are often placed at the feet of ex-prisoners. Could it be that such outlooks are equally associated with descendants of prisoners, who may have had no knowledge of what their father, uncle or grandfather actually thought, or even others, who have no association with prisoners of war? Cultural historians have described this as an act of 'post-memory'.<sup>74</sup> In this case, by appropriating memories of those held in captivity, others claim to speak on their ancestor's behalf, or base their views on perceived knowledge about the prisoner-of-war story. An example of this phenomenon was the public response to the announcement of closer defence ties between Australia and Japan in March 2007. Talkback callers and letters to the editor opposing the treaty often cited Japanese wartime atrocities, with many using the fact that their grandfather or uncle was a prisoner of the Japanese to justify their objections.<sup>75</sup> This is an area in need of further scholarship; almost seventy-five years on from the end of the conflict, it is perhaps more important than ever to listen to the range of voices of those who had face-to-face contact with Japan, and to be wary of those who purport to speak on their behalf.

## Conclusion

The complexity of the prisoner-of-war experience, highlighted by the diverse conditions facing Australian prisoners of war in Japan, provides a rich narrative that counters popular understandings. Not only did camp conditions vary across Japan, from the extremes of Naoetsu, where sixty Australian prisoner of war died (a large proportion of the 190 Australian prisoners of war killed in Japan), to the less brutal camps of Zentsuji, Kawasaki, Nakama or Kobe, where although conditions were tough prisoners had a far better chance of survival. Prisoners of war in Japan also encountered ruthless American-influenced camp cultures and, most importantly, made contacts with Japanese civilians whom many found to be quite different from their tormentors in the Japanese military. A significant outcome for many prisoners was the observation that the ordinary Japanese civilian—often their fellow factory, foundry or mine worker—was as much a victim of Japanese militarism as they were. The four thousand Australian prisoners of war imprisoned in Japan are therefore a significant group. Often neglected by a literature weighted toward the Thai–Burma railway, the experiences of this group remind us of the variety of circumstances and conditions that faced the 22000 Australian prisoners of the Japanese. That such diverse stories and outlooks existed in camps across Asia remind us of the dangers of making generalisations about the experiences and attitudes of prisoners of war.

## Notes

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