

Japan slowly recognises its war past

The repatriation of the remains of a Japanese prisoner of war from Australia is a significant step in the country's relationship with its war past, writes **KEIKO TAMURA**.

On the outskirts of the small NSW country town of Cowra sits the Japanese War Cemetery.

It attracts some tourists after they visit the nearby prisoner of war (POW) campsite and the Japanese Gardens but usually it is quiet.

You can easily contemplate the fate of the 500 or so Japanese nationals, POWs and civilian internees who died in Australia during the Second World War.

Nearly half of those died on one day in August 1944, when more than 1,000 Japanese POWs broke out of the camp; 234 perished.

Yet, on a sunny spring day last September, the cemetery was a hive of activity.

The very first exhumation of a Japanese POW's remains took place.

The soldier's family travelled from Japan, accompanied by Japanese government officials.

An archaeologist conducted the excavation, watched on by local council officials and media.

I was there primarily as a researcher but my involvement had turned rather personal through my chance encounter with the dead soldier's family a year earlier.

My interest in Cowra started about a decade ago and, since 2014, I have been researching how and why the Japanese War Cemetery was established.

While Japan's official policy on soldiers' remains has been to repatriate, the only officially recognised Japanese war cemetery outside Japan is in Cowra. Why?



ANU academic Keiko Tamura at the Australian War Memorial.

The uncle she had never met

During the 70th anniversary commemoration of the breakout in August 2014, I found a grave with flowers and incense sticks. There I met Yasuko Hayashi, who told me the story of her uncle whom she had never

Distance was often cited as

met.

He was Michiaki Wakaomi, the dead soldier in that grave. The family was told he was killed in New Guinea in 1944.

Yet six months earlier, they learned he was captured by the Allies and transferred to Australia as a POW.

He succumbed to pneumonia in July 1945, was cremated and eventually buried in Cowra.

The family's wish was to partially repatriate his ashes to his home temple in Nagano.

Numerous commemorations have been held at the cemetery over the last 50 years with dignitaries from both countries, including the Japanese royal family.

Yet, the presence of bereaved families was always missing.

Distance was often cited as the reason. In reality, many families did not know their loved one died as a POW in Australia.

In 1959, the Japanese government attempted to match the names provided by Australian authorities with its own records, but the survey was not properly carried through.

Shameful for the soldier and their family

Japan is still coming to terms with the consequences of that war 70 years ago.

I concluded the main reason for this shortcoming was the overwhelming sentiment during the war and later.

To be captured and to die as a POW was shameful not only for the soldier but for his family.

Thus, the real identities of those who were buried in Cowra were not investigated, nor the families notified.

Let the dead not be awakened but keep them silent in a faraway land.

Wakaomi's family lobbied the Japanese and Australian authorities relentlessly.

For his family, the fact he had stated his real identity during the interrogation was proof of his desire to return home and the repatriation of his ashes was to be his homecoming after seventy years.

The ashes were located after eight hours of digging and taken back to Nagano.

Japan is still coming to terms with the consequences of that war 70 years ago.

POW issues have been significant for Australia.

Meanwhile, Japan is finally re-examining its treatment of its own soldiers and the stigma towards those who died as POWs.

Wakaomi finally went home as a soldier.

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