Guards, civilians & internees

'We became quite matey, actually' – Arthur Leggett

Liverpool prisoner of war and internment camp, NSW 1945. A group of Italian prisoners of war behind the wire perimeter fence of the main compound.
The stories in this DVD chapter can be used to promote classroom discussion, formal debates, further research or individual assignments.

Here are some ideas for students to consider while watching this DVD chapter.

- POW camps were isolated worlds where civilised rules and accepted behaviour were often abandoned. Although Australian prisoners of war had many reasons to dislike, perhaps even to hate, their captors, some did experience guards who treated them with compassion and humanity.

- What examples can you find in the DVD that support or challenge this suggestion?

- Discuss the different relationships that can exist between guards and prisoners. Write a list of these relationships as you view the chapter.

**DVD Chapter 4 – Guards, civilians and internees**

**Summary**

This chapter explores the relationships that existed between guards and Australian POWs. Far from being straightforward, these relationships were often complex. The chapter examines the occasional compassion felt by both sides for the other, as well as the more brutal behaviour exhibited by some guards and its legacy in the memories of POWs. The chapter also explores the stories of POWs and civilian internees imprisoned in Australia during the Second World War and focuses on the Japanese breakout at the Cowra POW camp in 1944.

Duration 14 minutes 23 seconds

*The script of this chapter can be found in printable text form on the CD-ROM*
Background - research

The Geneva Convention

All forms of punishment, confinement in premises not lit by daylight and in general, all forms of cruelty whatsoever are prohibited. Collective penalties for individual acts are also prohibited.

– From Article 46, Geneva Convention, 1929

The first convention between nations that agreed on the treatment of POWs was the Hague Convention of 1907. After the First World War, the Geneva Convention, created in 1929, revised and bound the values of accepted, civilised behaviour to the treatment of those captured in wartime. The conventions have been amended over time as warfare has changed. The Convention was revised again in 1949, after the experiences of the Second World War.

As a class, debate the value of the Geneva Convention. How would you update it for the 21st century?

Debate the statement that 'international treaties are a waste of time'.

It has been suggested that German captors honoured the Geneva Convention for keeping prisoners and while the Japanese signed the Convention they refused to ratify it, and as a result, were much crueler captors. Can you find any evidence in the DVD chapters to support this claim?

Guards

This chapter illustrates that some captors were sympathetic towards their prisoners, even under difficult conditions.

Review the relevant section of the DVD. Break into two groups; one analyses and lists the feelings and personal challenges faced by the guards and the other the feelings and personal challenges faced by the prisoners. Each group prepares a statement and explains their conclusions to the other. What are the points of difference? What are the similarities?

Look at the photograph below.

The caption to this photograph reads: Probably Singapore, 1942. Probably an Allied working party taken soon after the fall of Singapore, 1942.

Write the story of how this photograph came to be taken. Discuss the various stories in the class.
Fred Skeels's story

In this chapter of the DVD, Able Seaman Fred Skeels describes Horeushi, a Japanese guard, who treated his prisoners with as much compassion and humanity as he could without being found out by his fellow guards.

He was the only one that I came across that would show you any sort of decency or respect, you know, this bloke Horeushi.

He was only a Jap soldier but he reckoned he was a Christian and he did act as such, he tried to help you when he could without being found out by his fellow guards, who would have probably given him a bashing or something else, you know.

Write a film plot

Using this information, write a plot for a film about Horeushi's relationship with the prisoners of war. A plot is not a script but a detailed description of the story of a film. Try to include scenes which reveal how Horeushi thought and felt about being a Japanese guard in a POW camp.

Class discussion

Why do you think Lloyd Cahill was comfortable having in-depth conversations with a Japanese guard?

Where was Lloyd Cahill and why? How may the situation have encouraged the conversations he was having?

How did Lloyd Cahill and the Japanese lieutenant differ in their views of returning home after being imprisoned?
Sister Berenice Twohill's story

Sister Berenice Twohill was captured along with missionaries, brothers and nuns in Rabaul, New Britain in 1941. For a time she lived in a hut surrounded by Japanese soldiers.

In front of us they put their wounded soldiers, their hospital. Those poor creatures, we used to feel so sorry for them.

Sister Twohill sympathetically describes the Japanese wounded soldiers as ‘those poor creatures’.

Sister Twohill also tells a story about the nuns repairing torn clothing for the wounded Japanese soldiers. They traded this service in return for drugs such as Quinine and Atebrin. This arrangement was a closely guarded secret during her captivity.

Focus questions

■ Explain why Sister Twohill felt sorry for the wounded soldiers.

■ What values did Sister Twohill hold to enable her to think and feel this way about the people who were imprisoning her?

■ Why do you think Sister Twohill kept her dealings with the Japanese secret at the time?

Fred Smith’s story

Private Thomas ‘Fred’ Smith describes while working hard building bridges, the Australian prisoners of the Japanese found a way to ‘vent their spleen’.

We used to sing a tune to it. What we started with was, itchy knees and savvv, [ichi, ni, san, shi] that was ‘one, two, three, four’ [in Japanese]. So after we got sick of that we’d sing, ‘You little yellow bastards! You little yellow bastards!’ Until someone put them wise to what we were saying. Then we’d all get done over. But it was worth it. We’d vent our spleen out with words like that.

■ Discuss what kept Fred Smith going during the darkest moments of his capture. How would you describe the way he coped?

■ The veterans interviewed on the DVD often use language that is no longer current. What does Fred Smith mean by ‘vent our spleen’ or ‘get done over’? Make a list of the other phrases in this chapter that are no longer current and research their meaning.

■ Why was it worth the risk of getting into trouble for insulting the Japanese?
And they continually walked around the camp harassing people, standing them up, making them bow to them which was a bloody awful experience, having to bow to a bloody Jap. And even these days when I see somebody bowing to a Jap, by jeez, it makes my blood boil… To them, of course, it was the normal thing to do, to bow to each other. But they made us bow to them instead of saluting and that was very hard to take.

Group discussion
Private Colin Hamley refers to his captors as ‘bloody Japs’. Understandably, he felt anger towards them.

- Do you think some of the Second World War generation and veterans still harbour negative attitudes towards the Japanese?
- Can you understand these lingering attitudes or should the passage of time bring forgiveness and acceptance? Share your ideas with your group.
- How does Colin Hamley’s account help you understand the cultural differences between the Australians and the Japanese?
- Australians purposely humiliated the Japanese at the time of their surrender by making them lay down their ceremonial swords and then taking them. How would you explain this action?

Geoff Cornish's story

The difference between the prisoners and the guards was that the quality of the guards, on a scale of A to Z, they were Z. Because anybody with any intelligence or ability was at the fighting front. And the guards that were too old or too stupid but were in the services were sent to be guards to us. That suited us fine because to be in aircrew your educational level had to be very, very high indeed. And we had twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week doing nothing but plot how we would get out of it. And how we would outwit the Germans – psychologically, physically, in every possible way, bluff, whatever … Yes, outsmarting was the best thing.

Class discussion
- Consider the coping mechanisms described by Fred Smith, Colin Hamley and Geoff Cornish.
- How do these three stories compare? How did each of the POWs mentioned cope with his situation?
- Which method do you think would work for you?
- Can you think of situations where you would need to use similar coping mechanisms in a school or a home setting?

Extension assignment
Arms suddenly found themselves in control of vast numbers of prisoners in both Europe and Asia during the Second World War.

- One major quandary facing German and Japanese administration was who to place in charge of prisoners. Capable officers were required at the front, so it was logical to place the least capable officers in charge of prisoners. What would be recognised as a ‘successful’ command of POWs by German or Japanese high command?
- How would you administer a POW camp? Consider the physical and daily requirements along with the administrative and managerial aspects.
Take up the stories
Story 7

Athol Moffitt's story

Captain Athol Moffitt was a prosecutor at the war crimes trials. His extensive collection of nicknames for the Japanese prison guards still brings a gleam to his eye. Think about how giving people nicknames can make you feel towards them.

- Why do we give people nicknames? Are they always a form of endearment? What are some nicknames that you and your friends have?

- List some of the nicknames that were given to the Japanese guards. Write down what characteristics may have earned the guards these nicknames.

- Discuss as a group, nicknames you are familiar with and use regularly. Are there any common elements among them?

- What do you think nicknames reveal about the Australian character?

Teachers note:
The recollections of Captain Athol Moffitt offer a counterpoint to some of the other stories in this archive. Teachers could use these to trigger serious debate among senior students.

At the end of the Second World War, close contact with the Japanese allowed some Australians to form complex, subtle opinions of their enemy. Captain Athol Moffitt had been sent to Borneo when his superiors, aware that he had been admitted to the Bar just before the war began, seconded him to the army's legal department, where he would take up a role as Australia's prosecutor in the war crimes trials.

Consider the following accounts by Athol Moffitt after the war.

So far as the prisoners were concerned, Japanese culture was such that they felt they had no duty to people who were foreigners, and strangers who were in occupied country. This was revealed by some writings of a Japanese professor after the war. The Japanese culture is based on a sense of duty – it's a very fine thing – their duty to different groups. And if you have a duty to a group it's very wonderful, and we do too. But if you had a higher duty to another group, the duty to the other one didn't exist. So if you had a person who was just a friend in your house you had some kind of duty to him. But if you had some higher duty such as to the Emperor, that duty to the stranger in your house ceased to exist.

And for those who are complete strangers, like in occupied territory, there was no duty, and in the Japanese culture, the Japanese writer, Professor Doi, explained that the Christian-Judaic culture of right and wrong hadn't ever got through to the Japanese. They had no sense of something being right and wrong, and to kill a person to whom you had no duty was no different to killing an animal. That's how it was.

– Athol Moffitt

Even after they had lost the war, at a time when one could reasonably have expected some degree of fellow compassion and mateship to have shown itself, the Japanese held fast to their ruthless discipline. Athol Moffitt spoke to an Australian sergeant who had been responsible for bringing defeated Japanese back out of the jungle to a prison camp.

He said, 'Officers, when they had the sick parade in the morning,' (this was on this march after they had surrendered), would give their own men who could not stand up, a mighty kick. Or who could not hold up their head, a hit across the face. No man would help another who fell down or was too sick to walk'.

I can understand now all that is said about the brutality of the Japs to our people when this is what they did to their own people.

– Athol Moffitt

Focus questions for senior students

- Compare and contrast Athol Moffitt's description of the Japanese behaviour when captured with that of the Australians you have heard.

- How do Athol Moffitt's recollections help you to understand the cultural differences that underpinned relations between Australian prisoners and their Japanese captors?

- Research some of Athol Moffitt's other recollections using his full interview on the Archive website or the accompanying CD-ROM. Do you think his education and understanding of Japanese culture has helped him cope with his experiences?

- How important is his cultural understanding to his role as a prosecutor? Should former POWs be in charge of prosecuting their captors? What ethical issues are involved in this decision?
Take up the stories
Stories 8 & 9

Arthur Leggett's story

The people of Munich are remarkable people.

Arthur Leggett, imprisoned by the Germans, describes the Munich citizens he comes across as the finest people he has met in his life.

- What examples can you find to explain how he comes to this conclusion?
- What does it say about the German people and what does it say about Arthur Leggett?
- What insight does Arthur Leggett’s story offer into the attitudes of ordinary civilians towards their country’s enemies in war?

Bill Coventry’s story

They are not logical.

- What does Bill Coventry’s story reveal about the Japanese as captors?
- What does it reveal about Bill’s own attitude to his captors?
- Explain how Bill Coventry’s account helps you understand the difficulties faced by Australian captives of the Japanese.
- What role do you feel cultural differences played in the negative interactions between the Australians and Japanese?
- Explain how this interview helps you understand the impact of captivity upon Australian soldiers.

Informal group portrait of Private Alan Chambers ‘Snowy’ Alderson, 2/1 Field Ambulance (far right, holding rake), with the German farming family with whom he worked whilst a prisoner of war.
Prisoners in Australia

Read the following texts and recall what you have seen and heard from the DVD.

Civilian Italian internees were joined in Australia by Italian soldiers, captured in the Middle East. Many of these soldiers worked on farms and lived reasonably comfortable lives during their captivity. And the farmers were delighted to have the extra labour.

Dorothy Singe's story

I think the general public around Orange just felt that they weren't at war with those boys whereas the Japanese – they had a different feeling all together. But I'm talking about a farmer's outlook. The city people may have felt differently again. But they didn't see that these fellows were working and providing the fruit for them to eat anyhow. And the lady that owned the property next to us was on her own, and she lived in this big house. She was an elderly lady I suppose. I suppose she would be seventy and on her own, and she had at least six of these POWs living in her old cottage and her packing shed. So she wasn't worried about them was she?

By August 1944, 10,200 Italian prisoners were working, without guards, on farms or in hostels; but the 1,585 Germans and 2,223 Japanese in Australia remained in prison camps.

- Outline the ways that Australians treated Italian, German and Japanese POWs.
- What social attitudes are reflected in the different ways these POWs were treated?
- How would the situation of the Italian POWs working on the lady's farm compare to that of Arthur Leggett in the work camp in Munich?
- Compare the way the Italian POWs would have regarded their Australian captors with the way Arthur felt about his German captors?
- How would POWs become 'quite matey' with the people around the Orange area?
- Design a set of questions so that you can interview the elderly lady who had six Italian POWs working on her farm. Construct your questions so that you can find out why she had the prisoners, what she thought of them, how helpful they were to her and how she viewed them.

Trevor Parker's story

Sergeant Trevor Parker was stationed in a training camp near Cowra when early on the morning of 5 August 1944, the Japanese POWs staged a breakout.

- Research the ‘Cowra Breakout’ of 1944, using the internet and your school library. Here are some websites to help you get started: www ww2australia.gov.au alla nbreakout.html www awm.gov.au encyclopedia cowra indexasp www anzacday org au history ww2 anecdotes cowra html
- You are stationed at Cowra. Report to Army headquarters about the breakout of the Japanese prisoners from Camp B of the Cowra POW compound.
- Draw the area of the camp where the breakout occurred, including the fences and the positions of the defending Australian soldiers. How did the Japanese prisoners escape?
- Interview Private Trevor Parker about that day and how he might have felt when the reality of the escape fully hit him. Describe how you would feel in the same situation.
- Describe ways the community of Cowra commemorate and remember both the Australians and the Japanese from that night.

Follow up research – the Japanese Memorial Gardens at Cowra

Go to the website: www cowraregion com au japanesegarden/ and research the memorial garden that has been established in Cowra.

- Design your own Memorial Garden.
- Think about how you would reflect the cultural background of the different nationalities in your garden and incorporate your ideas into your design.

Extension task

- Work with a group and storyboard a documentary film on the breakout. Storyboard your script and then film it.
Review

Review task

- Watch the DVD again and keep a list of the positive and negative things the former prisoners have to say about their captors.
- When you have completed your list, analyse it and use it as the basis for a discussion on differences between nations, beliefs and ideologies.
- List the differences between the experience of prisoners of the German and the Japanese.
  - What explanation can you develop for these differences?
  - Is there any evidence that Australians got on better with European rather than Asian captors?

Class debates
Assign various teams within the class to argue the affirmative or the negative position.

- Nothing good comes from being involved in war.
- ‘If we had taken them prisoners, we might have been the same to them.’ (Colin Hamley’s suggestion about the Japanese.)

Discussion topics
- Explain the complexities of relations between prisoners, captors and civilians that this section reveals.
- Explain how friendships could develop between prisoners and civilians in the countries in which they were held prisoner.
- What do the accounts given here tell you about the civilian support for war in all the countries involved?

Writing
A TV panel chat show features Fred Skeels, Lloyd Cahill, Sister Berenice Twohill and Colin Hamley. They are discussing their wartime experiences.

- Take the role of the mediator and ask questions based on the interviews in the DVD or from the full transcripts available on the Australians at War Film Archive website or the accompanying CD-ROM.
- Write the transcript of the chat show.

Reflection

National stereotype – focus questions
- Describe the national stereotypes that are presented in the DVD.
- What evidence supports the generalisations?
- How do you think Australians should be portrayed?
- Can these sorts of stereotypical generalisations have a positive role?
- Is there any evidence that the Australian POWs regarded themselves as superior to both their allies and their captors?

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A H Comber
The tunnel was to come up on the woods beyond the guard box Stalag Luft III Shropshire and London 1945
Pen and ink, brush and ink wash, pencil on paper
28.6 x 39.2 cm
Australian War Memorial (ART34781.021)