‘I saw life at its best and it’s worst’ – Sister Berenice Twohill

Changi, Singapore. September 1945. Liberated 8th Division men at the Changi prisoner of war (POW) camp in Singapore carrying rice from the mess. This gives some indication of the limited rations supplied to 250 men.
DVD Chapter 6 – Food, conditions and treatment

Summary

This DVD chapter deals with some of the more difficult information about the POW experience, including mistreatment and brutality. It begins by examining how critical the supply of food was for prisoners and how they had to learn to share their food and to eat certain kinds of food they would otherwise have rejected. From there, the chapter extends into a wider overview of conditions in some camps, revealing stories of physical mistreatment and cruelty. Veterans also speak of the selfless behaviour of the POW doctors and how, even in the midst of inhumanity, nobility could be found.

Duration 14 minutes 37 seconds

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

From the moment of surrender a POW is at the mercy of the military force which has captured him. He, or she, must abide by its rules, its discipline, its principles, its culture, and particularly the demands and orders of the guards. The prisoner is vulnerable, unarmed and probably unknown and unseen by the rest of the world. For the captors, ill treatment can become a new standard of behaviour.

Interpretation and analysis

As you have seen, both the German and Japanese armies were overwhelmed by the number of prisoners they initially captured in the Second World War. Draw up a list of orders for both German and Japanese camp commanders explaining how they are to administer the large numbers of prisoners they have now acquired. Consider issues such as housing, health, food, work, discipline and general treatment. Use the Geneva Convention of 1929 as the basis for your orders. You will find it at www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/FULL/305?OpenDocument.

Synthesis and evaluation

Create two mind maps, one centred on ‘hate’ and one centred on ‘respect’. Are there any words that can overlap? Explain how these representations can help you understand the conditions in POW camps.

Knowledge and comprehension

Draw up a table with columns for each of the nationalities who held Australian POWs. As you work through this material, list the ways the prisoners were treated by each of those nationalities and indicate whether the treatment was good or bad.

At the end of the section decide whether you think any group treated prisoners worse than the others. What do you think were the reasons for this?
Take up the stories
Stories 1, 2 & 3

Reg Worthington's story

He tasted pretty good in the stew. Ah, poor little dog.

Discussion questions
■ Can you imagine a situation now when you would be so hungry that you would resort to eating stewed dog?
■ Could such an event happen?
■ How would you feel about it?
■ Have you ever been so hungry that you thought you’d pass out or worse?
■ Discuss this with your group and be prepared to report back to the class.
■ Apart from dog, what did other prisoners in this DVD chapter report eating out of desperation?
■ What do you think would be the most disgusting or distasteful?

Ken Drew’s story

There were new manners to learn, a kind of prisoner’s etiquette.

Individual assignment or group work
■ Using the information from this chapter, come up with six or seven ‘rules for sharing’ that would be applicable to these prisoners. Keep them simple and fair to all.

Bill Coventry’s story

Slowly as time went by we learnt how to cook rice, didn’t we?

Individual assignments
■ Write three diary entries for Sergeant Bill Coventry making sure that you include his comments about the prisoners’ hunger and their meagre rations.
■ Try to cover four or five days of his imprisonment, but start after he has had time to become really hungry. How does he feel about it? What does he do to cope with hunger pain?
**Thomas Smith's story**

You’d see little brown heads looking at you.

Thomas Smith tells us the doctors in camp wouldn’t allow the washing of rice because the grubs and grub nests in it had vitamins which would be lost in the washing process.

- Why are vitamins important?
- Some of the diseases the prisoners contracted were cholera, malaria, dysentery, typhus and beri beri. Find out whether any of these are caused by a lack of particular vitamins.
- The prisoners had to obtain protein wherever they could find it, often resorting to food sources they had previously never considered. What were some of those sources?
- Why was it so important for the prisoners to eat protein?
- What are the best sources of protein? From what foods do you get your protein?

**Howard Walker’s story**

We got bad rice, sad rice, that fills you with its sorrow,

We got potty rice, stodgy rice, that meant tummy pains tomorrow.

Howard Walker, the son of missionary parents, was imprisoned in China at the age of fourteen. Listen to his reading of a poem about rice written by another prisoner.

In contrast to this poem, create your own ‘Delicious Rice’ poem. Try and include every good thing you can about the nutritional value of rice as well as all the delicious ways you can think of for serving and eating rice.
Take up the stories
Stories 6, 7 & 8

Sheila Bruhn's story

*A little bit of salt on it and it was quite tasty.*

**Focus questions**

- How does Sheila Bruhn's story help you understand how bad conditions must have been in Changi?
- How would you describe Sheila Bruhn’s attitude when she relates her story of survival? Use as many adjectives as you can.

George 'Bert' Beecham's story

*The treatment of POWs working on the railway line was absolutely horrendous.*

**Research**

- Diseases were plentiful amongst the POWs working on the railway line... cholera, malaria, dysentery, typhus, beri beri. Do these diseases still exist today? Find out and report back.
- What were the symptoms of these diseases and how serious were they?
- If they no longer exist, what has happened to eradicate them?
- What distresses Bert Beecham most about the attitude of the Japanese?
- Can you understand why he still has such strong feelings? Explain why.

Terry Fairbairn’s story

*I was belted and belted...*

This is the beginning of Lieutenant Terry Fairbairn’s account of the torture and humiliation he had to endure for the ‘crime’ of criticising Hitler during an interrogation.

After that episode, he was often singled out for more cruel treatment:

> And they belted me several times in other places after that. I was in handcuffs for nine months at another camp and I was only selected for that because of what I was and because of what I'd done. It wasn't the best experience of my lifetime, but certainly it proved to me what the average German was like then, and can become like now, in my view. – Terry Fairbairn

**Research and composition**

Find out more about Lieutenant Terry Fairbairn’s story by reading his complete interview at www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa/interviews/1674.aspx or on the accompanying CD-ROM.

Write a profile of Lieutenant Fairbairn for the weekend magazine of a newspaper.

Comment on the way Terry Fairbairn’s account helps you to understand:

- the effect of war on individuals;
- the need for counselling and debriefing when soldiers return from war;
- the way prisoners were treated;
- the Geneva Conventions; and
- the spirit of soldiers in captivity.
Bill Coventry’s Story

There is no logic in the Jap, you can’t work out what he is doing and what he is thinking. They would give you a hiding for something you wouldn’t know what you have done. They would just pick on… pick on me just because I was taller than he was or something and find an excuse to give you a hiding.—Bill Coventry

Assignments

Taking into account this excerpt, other interviews and your extended research, write your response to one of the following:

- Explain how these accounts help you understand the difficulties faced by Australian captives of the Japanese.
- What role do you feel cultural differences played in the interactions between the Australians and the Japanese?
- How do the accounts on the DVD help you understand the difficulties the Second World War survivors might have had dealing with ideas of Japan after the war, such as meeting Japanese people or seeing them in the media, or seeing Japanese products in stores?
- Explain how these interviews help you understand the impact of captivity upon Australian soldiers.

Phillip Greville's story

Cruel treatment of POWs was not only experienced in Japanese camps. During the Korean War, Captain Phillip Greville tells us where his Chinese interrogators placed him.

I was incarcerated in this box which had been a crate surrounding something like a domestic refrigerator. - Phillip Greville

- Do you think the treatment Phillip Greville received in Korea is any different from the treatment that the prisoners in the Second World War received?
- Is there any indication in this account that the Geneva Conventions had been amended in 1949?
- Draw to scale the dimensions of the solitary cage that imprisoned Phillip Greville. Examine ways that one, two and three men could fit into the cage.

Murray Griffin
An incident on the Burma railway
Melbourne VIC 1946
Brush and brown ink and wash over coloured pencil on paper
35 x 50.8 cm
Australian War Memorial (ART26525)
Tom Uren's story

Bombardier Tom Uren on Lieutenant Colonel Edward 'Weary' Dunlop:
He was a very kind, quietly spoken human being.

Synthesis, evaluation and analysis
- Watch the interview in Chapter 6 of the DVD, and answer the following questions.
- What is Tom Uren's opinion of 'Weary' Dunlop? Can this opinion be confirmed by further research? Here are some websites to get you started:
  - www.abc.net.au/schoolstv/australians/dunlop.htm
  - home.vicnet.net.au/~a23mgb/f_hist/wdun_his.htm
- What example does Tom Uren give to demonstrate how effective Weary Dunlop was as a leader?
- Weary Dunlop and Tom Uren, both famous Australians, feature in this episode. Write a feature article for a newspaper that focuses on their wartime achievements. Use the information from the DVD plus anything else you can find out. Include a headline that will capture the attention of your reader.

Look at the art work below. It is by a prisoner named Jack Chalker and shows Colonel Edward 'Weary' Dunlop and Captain Jacob Markowitz working on a thigh amputation in Chungkai POW hospital.

- What does the painting show of conditions in the camp hospital?
- How different are the conditions from those you would see in a hospital today?
- What difficulties do you think Weary Dunlop faced when conducting medical procedures in this camp hospital?
- What do you think happened to the prisoner patient before the operation?
- What happened to him afterwards?

Jack Chalker
Colonel Edward "Weary" Dunlop and Captain Jacob Markowitz working on a thigh amputation, Chungkai
Oil on cardboard
21 x 29.7 cm
Australian War Memorial ART91848
Sister Twohill's story

Sister Berenice Twohill was imprisoned for three and a half years on New Britain. Her accommodation slowly degenerated from the Vunapope mission buildings, to native huts surrounded by barbed wire, and finally, to muddy trenches at the bottom of a ravine in the jungle.

For those of us who have never been imprisoned, there is no way to fully understand what it was actually like for the POWs. Only those who were there can properly speak of it. In Sister Twohill’s words:

*Being a prisoner of war changed me definitely, because I was just a young sister. I saw life at its best and its worst. I saw what human beings could do to each other, what hatred could do and yet what faith could do and what kindness could do. That’s what we are here for, to help one another. I saw how useless all this is, when people go on hating one another and killing one another. How someone lives with that I don’t know, lives with themselves I mean.*

*When you have just massacred a whole lot of people, how would you feel? I don’t know. We are all born with animal instincts in all of us. War brings it out in so many. In war it makes some men, men; but others… it just makes them animals.*

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- Describe how her experiences in the Second World War changed Sister Twohill.
- ‘I saw life at its best and its worst.’ To what extent does Sister Twohill’s comment summarise the experiences of POWs? What else would be needed to make it a more complete summary?
- ‘War, it makes some men, men; but others… it just makes them animals.’ How does this chapter of the DVD help you understand Sister Twohill’s comment? Can you find evidence in the DVD to support her conclusion?
- Using the excerpt above as stimulus, create a values table, listing the emotions and behaviours evident from the DVD and the outcomes that came from them.
Concept mapping

Note for teacher:
In a concept map some key concepts or terms are arranged on a piece of paper and each is connected by lines to as many others as is sensibly possible. The nature of the connection is written on every line. This text written on the linking lines requires an analytical approach by the student, and asks them to articulate the link.

Concept maps are an excellent stimulus for small group or whole class discussion and require higher order thinking. Maps can encourage students to link ideas in new ways.

One suggestion for a concept map applicable to this segment of the DVD is a focus on food. Here are some ideas to include in a list for students (or to use as an initial stimulus for students to create their own maps) are:

- survival
- nutrition (protein, fruit and vegetables, carbohydrates etc)
- food allocation and sharing
- cooking
- scavenging
- Red Cross supplies withheld

Interpretation and analysis

- Use the information from Chapter 6 of the DVD to create a table which will help another student to learn and understand the most important information about living conditions, food and treatment in POW camps.

- Hint: think carefully about the different headings or categories of information first – this will ensure that your table is clear and easy to understand.

Creative writing

You are a war correspondent on assignment – the POWs have just been liberated and you are investigating the conditions of the camps and speaking with freed prisoners. Use the information in Chapter 6 of the DVD to complete the following activities:

- Write an article about conditions in a Japanese or German camp. Your purpose in writing this article is to show your readers the horror of war and the difficulties faced by POWs. Include a graphic (map, drawing or photograph) to illustrate your argument.

- Write a different article describing the conditions in a Japanese or German POW camp. Your purpose in writing this article is to show your readers the glory of war and the positive outcomes of the war, despite the difficulties faced by prisoners. Include a graphic (map, drawing or photograph) to support your argument.

- Which article do you think would have been published? Write a paragraph explaining your answer.

Synthesis, evaluation and analysis

Because they had to find sources of food not available in the camps, the Australian POWs found ways to trade with communities outside the camps. In the European camps, this was a little easier as they were permitted some contact with the locals.

In these DVD chapters we have heard accounts of prisoners trading items for food, such as the Dutchman on Ambon acquiring two pork chops in Chapter 5.

Here is another account:

We were taken out on wood parties which was marvellous. I was a non smoker. We got ten cigarettes. It was frowned on very much if you exchanged those with a smoker for his food, but outside they were wonderful. You could get a loaf of bread for two cigarettes. You could get a dozen eggs for four cigarettes, so it was trading with the Germans that you would meet outside, basically farming communities nearby. And while there you were collecting your wood to bring back, a marvellous source of extra food for people. The guards allowed it because they were hard put to feed us. - John Mathews

- Draw up two columns headed ‘Germany’ and ‘Japan’. In each column keep a list of the food that was available to the prisoners. How would you describe the major differences between the two situations? Are there any things that form part of your own diet?

- What impact did these different diets have on prisoners’ health?

- Experiment with recipes based on the ingredients you have listed above. How difficult is it to find variety and healthy combinations?
Review

Take home assignment: food diary
- Keep a food diary for a week, writing down everything you eat and drink in that time.
- Using the Dietary Guidelines for Australians and the Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents in Australia research the nutritional needs of an adult male and the nutritional needs of someone your own age. Compare the two.
- How did the diets of the prisoners of war in the Japanese camps compare with the nutritional information you gathered for an adult male and for yourself?

Group project: What makes a good leader?
Here are some ideas:
- Courage
- Self control
- Justice and fairness towards others
- Self-assuredness
- Setting clear goals
- Formulating an action plan
- Self-belief
- Going above and beyond the call of duty
- Likeability
- Empathy, sympathy and understanding
- Attention to detail
- Willing to assume responsibility
- Team player
- Passion
- Integrity
- Knowledge/experience

- Do you agree with this list?
- Change the list if you don’t.
- Discuss and decide on the four most important attributes you believe that people need to be a strong leader.
- Write down your characteristics and explain your reasons for choosing them.
- Create a PowerPoint presentation or a series of posters about the four characteristics that you have decided on.
- Give examples of strong leaders identified by your research and the specific characteristics which made them strong leaders.
- How do you think good leadership would assist survival in a POW camp?

Individual research: ‘Weary’ Dunlop
- Visit the following weblinks on ‘Weary’ Dunlop:
  - www.abc.net.au/schoolstv/australians/dunlop.htm
  - home.vicnet.net.au/~a23mgb/f_hist/wdun_hist.htm
- Create a timeline of Weary’s life and a list of his achievements.
- Decide on four characteristics that he possessed that helped him be a good leader.
- Present your findings to the other members of your group or class.

Murray Griffin
Hospital ward, Thailand railway, 1946
Brush and brown ink and wash over pencil, heightened with white  35.1 x 51.2 cm
Australian War Memorial (ART25104)
Reflection

This section contains some graphic material dealing with the real horrors of war. It is natural to be affected by what you hear.

- Why do you think it would be difficult for veterans to speak candidly about their POW experiences? Why or why not?
- Why do you think it is important for future generations to hear and understand what happened to POWs?
- Would former POWs be more likely to speak to their children, their grandchildren or a professional interviewer about their experiences? Why?
- Create a warning that prepares students for what they hear during this section of interviews.

Singapore, c. 1945. Five Australian former prisoners of war of the Japanese relax with cups of tea and a newspaper after the Japanese surrender. Their thin bodies show the physical effects of captivity.