The history of Australian prisoners of war

“Captivity in war is a difficult and confronting experience, regardless of the particular conflict.”

Dr. Rosalind Hearder

Wounded Australian prisoners of war at the German collecting station on morning of the 20th July during the Battle of Fleurbaix which took place on 19 July 1916 and 20 July 1916.
Background

A short history of Australians in captivity during times of war

By Dr Rosalind Heeder

When enlisting, few soldiers, sailors or aircrew would ever expect to become a prisoner and spend the war at the whim of their enemy. Yet just as death and disease are an inevitable part of warfare, so too is captivity.

Australians have experienced imprisonment from the Boer War to the Korean War, but when it comes to the place of POWs in the Australian military story, some have been relatively ‘forgotten’. There is a tendency to focus on ‘operational’ military stories – in other words, the people and events that directly affected the course and outcome of wars. Still, not all Australian POWs have been neglected. When most Australians today think of POWs, they will probably recall stories of the men and women who were prisoners of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Second World War. There are some understandable reasons for this: they represented the highest number group of Australian POWs of any conflict, then or since; and their experience was of unprecedented brutality and horror.

While this story may continue to overshadow other Australian POW experiences, it is important to remember all the others, and understand what each Australian POW experienced. Captivity in war is a difficult and confronting experience, regardless of the particular conflict.

Table 1: Conflicts and numbers of Australian POWs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Australian POWs captured</th>
<th>Mortality Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boer War (1899-1902)</td>
<td>~104*</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War One (1914-1918)</td>
<td>4,070</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>World War Two (1939-1945)</td>
<td>22,376 (Pacific)</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8,591 (Europe)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean War (1950-1953)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*All figures sourced from the Australian War Memorial. Estimates of Australian POWs in the Boer War vary greatly. The figure of 104 refers to Australians captured in the conventional phase of the war and does not include the many Australians who were briefly held and then released in the guerrilla phase of the war.

Captivity in war before the 20th century

As long as recorded history has existed, captives have been taken in times of war – both those who fight and civilians. Until the 20th century there were few internationally agreed-upon ‘laws’ to govern how captors must treat their prisoners of war. Prior to this many POWs were either released, or died in captivity either through execution or mistreatment. The International Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907 contained guidelines on the treatment of POWs but the unprecedented conditions of the First World War showed that the regulations needed to be amended and strengthened.

After the First World War, a group of nations passed a resolution called the ‘Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War’ in Geneva on 27 July, 1929. This convention set out broad rules regarding the treatment of POWs and it was aimed at protecting vulnerable and defenceless individuals. After the Second World War, the Third Edition of the Geneva Convention, 1949 replaced the 1929 Convention. The new version included the following principles:

Prisoners of war must be:
- treated humanely with respect for their persons and their honour;
- enabled to inform their next of kin and the International Red Cross of their capture;
- allowed to correspond regularly with relatives and to receive relief parcels;
- allowed to keep their clothes, feeding utensils and personal effects;
- supplied with adequate food and clothing;
- provided with quarters not inferior to those of their captor’s troops;
- given the medical care their state of health demands;
- paid for any work they do;
- repatriated if certified seriously ill or wounded, (but they must not resume active military duties afterwards);
- quickly released and repatriated when hostilities cease;

Prisoners of war must not be:
- compelled to give any information other than their name, age, rank and service number;
- deprived of money or valuables without a receipt (and these must be returned at the time of release);
- given individual privileges other than for reasons of health, sex, age, military rank or professional qualifications;
- held in close confinement except for breaches of the law, although their liberty can be restricted for security reasons; and
- compelled to do military-related work, nor work which is dangerous, unhealthy or degrading.

(See the relevant documents at The International Council for the Red Cross’ Humanitarian Law - Treaties & Documents: www.icrc.org)

Whether or not these guidelines are actually followed during times of war differs between nations, commanders and particular individuals. Those countries that were not signatories to the 1929 Geneva Convention could claim they had no obligation to uphold its regulations. Japan had signed the Geneva Convention, but their Parliament had not ratified it (formally approved it), so Japanese forces claimed the right to use their POWs for whatever labour purposes they saw fit.

AUSTRALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN ENEMY HANDS

The Boer War 1899-1902

In 1899, descendents of Dutch settlers who had migrated to Southern Africa since the 17th century (called ‘Boers’), invaded the British-held colonies of Natal and Cape Colony. After nine months of conventional war, followed by two years of guerrilla warfare, the better-armed and equipped British Empire forces were victorious. The war ended in 1902 with the Treaty of Vereeniging establishing British administrative control.

Though we were not yet a federated nation, Australia was part of the British Empire, and so individual Australian colonies offered troops. More than 16,000 Australians served in colonial based contingents. From 1 January 1901, when Australia federated, they served in national contingents. Thousands of Australians joined South African units and some joined British units. But it was to be disease (mainly typhoid) that would kill half the almost 600 Australians who died during the war. Many thousands more British troops died of illness than on the battlefield.

The First World War 1914-1918

The First World War, also known as the Great War was to be a terrible experience for the newly federated nation of Australia. A war that became a baptism of fire, killing tens of thousands of young men, also creating the foundation for new traditions of patriotism, and an increasingly distinct national identity apart from Britain.

Both sides took prisoners during the war. British forces captured many thousands of Boer soldiers and civilians and an estimated ten percent died from disease, lack of sanitation and poor nutrition. Some of these civilians were women and children.

On the other side, British and Australian soldiers were also taken prisoner, including a young war correspondent who would go on to become Britain’s Prime Minister during the Second World War – Winston Churchill. Australian POWs in the Boer War numbered around 104 and suffered from the same conditions as the civilian internees. Most of them were liberated by British forces by June 1900.

Some 60,000 Australian military personnel were killed during the Great War, and about 160,000 were wounded. More than 4,070 Australians spent the war as prisoners. The Gallipoli campaign saw the first of 217 Australians captured by Ottoman [Turkish] forces. The AE2, Australia’s second war submarine, was sunk in the Sea of Marmara on 30 April 1915. Torpedoed by the Turkish boat Sultan Hissar, the 32-man crew was forced to abandon ship, and all were taken prisoner. The crew of the AE2 were put to work on building a railway in southern Turkey. Suffering from disease and starvation, four died in captivity.

Other Australians were captured during the Gallipoli and Middle Eastern ground campaigns, and Australian airmen were also captured in what is now Iraq. One-quarter of Australian POWs died in Turkish captivity due to poor food and disease.

On the Western Front battlefields from 1916-1918, 3,853 Australian troops were taken prisoner by German forces, most of them held in Germany. A third of these Australian prisoners were captured on 11 April 1917 at the First Battle of Bullecourt in northern France. A number of Australian airmen were also shot down and captured by the Germans.

Although these Australian prisoners survived in proportionally higher numbers than their comrades in Ottoman camps, their experience was a difficult one, and their captors were generally harsh. Conditions were crowded (the Germans held over five million Allied POWs during the war), and food supplies were often disrupted, particularly during the Allied blockade of 1917-1918. Many non-officer POWs were made to work for the Germans in war-related capacities – a direct breach of the Hague Conventions.

The Second World War
1939 -1945

Almost a million Australian men and women served in North Africa, Europe, the Mediterranean, the South West Pacific and Southeast Asia during the Second World War. Over 30,000 did not return home.

One of the most significant differences between this war and the First World War was the number of Australian troops captured. Almost eight times the number captured in the First World War were captured in the Second World War; the majority of these as prisoners of the Japanese. In a war where atrocities were common, the Japanese treatment of its POWs was perhaps the darkest chapter for Australia’s wartime history; an experience difficult for the nation to comprehend.

Almost 9,000 Australians were held in Italian and German camps and experienced varying degrees of brutality and mistreatment. Some 250 of these men died during the war and their experiences continue to be overshadowed by that of their Pacific comrades. Stories of German imprisonment often focus on daring stories of escape rather than the realities of day-to-day life as a Kriegsgefangener (the German term for prisoner of war).

Below we will examine three aspects of Australian Second World War captivity: military personnel held in Japanese camps, civilians and nurses held in Japanese camps, and military personnel held in European camps.

I. Military personnel in Japanese captivity

Almost 22,000 Australian servicemen (~21,000 Army, 354 Navy and 373 RAAF) were captured by the Japanese, most at the fall of Singapore. After landing on the Malayan north-east coast on 8 December 1941, the Japanese Army swiftly forced British, Indian and Australian infantry back down the Malayan peninsula and on to Singapore Island. The Japanese were responsible for massacres along the way, such as 150 Australians and Indians at Parit Sulong and over 200 British medical personnel and wounded at Alexandra Barracks Hospital in Singapore. After a week of heavy fighting and casualties, trapped on Singapore Island with no means of escape, British command formally surrendered to the Japanese on 15 February, 1942.

After the capitulation, 14,972 Australians (including wounded) were marched to Changi camp in Singapore, along with thousands more British, Indian and Dutch troops. Few imagined they would be prisoners for the next three and a half years, or that one-third of them would die in captivity. Over the next months, thousands of Allied POWs left Changi, sent with work parties to the far corners of Japan’s empire.

Smaller groups of Australian soldiers were captured in New Britain, Ambon, Timor and Java, along with sailors from HMAS Perth (sunk on 1 March 1942).

Life in captivity

By mid-1942, the Japanese army controlled a vast and expendable labour force. Throughout Asia, Allied prisoners worked on railways, aerodromes and other construction projects, in factories, mines, shipyards and docks.

For three and a half years American POWs battled disease, starvation, exhausting work and the brutality of their captors. Although thousands of Allied POWs perished at sea or in the notorious Sandakan death march, the main cause of death for Allied prisoners was a combination of disease and starvation. Despite the valiant efforts of 106 Australian medical officers, nearly 8,000 Australians died as prisoners, in desperate and degrading conditions. These 8,000 represented one quarter of all Australian deaths during the war. For a national population of then only seven million, this was a catastrophic loss. For many Australians, the POW experience was understandably an important chapter in the larger story of the war.

A typical day’s ration in most camps would be a ½ - 1 cup of white rice, and some watery vegetable soup. Meat was eaten perhaps once or twice a month. Without basic protein and vitamins, starvation was the biggest killer of POWs, and with the resulting low immunity they could not fight any of the myriad diseases that dogged them through captivity. POW medical officers battled a range of medical conditions like malaria and dengue fever (diseases transmitted by mosquitoes), dysentery (an infection of the digestive system causing severe diarrhoea), pellagra and beriberi (vitamin deficiency diseases), tropical ulcers, and outbreaks of the most deadly and contagious disease – cholera (a bacterial disease causing severe diarrhoea and dehydration). If cholera came to a camp, up to 60-80% of the camp could be dead within days.

POWs always tried to improve their conditions wherever they could. Alcohol stills were built to manufacture disinfectant, carpenters made artificial limbs from wood and scrap metal for the many amputees from tropical ulcers, and chemists experimented with the medicinal qualities of the plants around them. In many places, black markets were set up with local communities to trade for food and medical supplies. Where possible, vegetable gardens were planted and chickens and ducks bred for eggs and meat. Any animals that were unfortunate enough to stray into the path of prisoners were soon meals. Rats, monkeys, cats and snakes were a few of the animals that Australian soldiers ate for the first time.

Why did POWs of the Japanese not try to escape? The simple answer is that there was little point. They were often in remote and inhospitable areas, most were sick and exhausted, and even if they had made it to a civilian village, locals would often turn them over to the Japanese for reward. Should a prisoner try to escape (some tried and almost all failed), he would be executed in front of the camp, and usually some form of punishment would be applied to the entire camp as a lesson.

Diversities of Japanese captivity

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Australians in Japanese captivity is that there was no one ‘POW experience’. Constant change characterised the POW experience – from locations, supplies of food and medications, to ever-changing captors. Attitudes and morale varied depending on how long men had been in captivity, and the kinds of conditions in which they were forced to live.

A prisoner could find himself captured in Singapore, go to Thailand to work on the Burma-Thai Railway, and end the war in Japan. Over three and a half years, he would experience very different camps, climates, types of work, diseases and mix with POWs of different nationalities.

His health would deteriorate over time, affecting his energy levels and will to survive. Battalions and units were broken up between camps, and every week he would watch friends and comrades die.

The enduring public representations of Australians in captivity often focus on just two areas: Changi and the Burma-Thailand Railway. Australians were prisoners of the Japanese in several other areas - Java, Sumatra, Japan, Borneo, Manchuria, Formosa (now Taiwan), Ambon and Hainan Islands, each with their own unique experiences and challenges. Below are brief descriptions of five areas of Japanese captivity where Australian POWs were held, demonstrating the varied conditions faced by Australian POWs.

1. Changi, Singapore

More than 100,000 Allied POWs were crammed into Changi camp (originally a British army barracks) after the fall of Singapore. Within a few weeks, the various Allied Army administrations assumed some sort of order, and things began to run fairly smoothly. Many work forces were assembled in Changi before being sent to the Burma-Thai Railway and other work camps throughout Asia.

The first major problem in the first few weeks was food. The radical change in diet – from army rations to mostly rice and a few vegetables given by the Japanese – caused significant digestive problems. Crowded conditions led to outbreaks of dysentery – a common and consistent problem across all camps.

It is a popular misunderstanding that Changi represented the place that exemplified the POW experience of suffering and deprivation. In fact, many POWs thought of Changi as a safe, comfortable ‘home base’ – a place to go back to, if they survived whatever journeys and other camps they faced. The Allied troops at Changi were well-organised, with a comprehensive and efficient military administration and the closest thing to a normal military hierarchy, where a prisoner could go months without seeing his captors, and where food and medical supplies were strictly regulated and well distributed.

2. Ambon

POW camps on Ambon and Hainan were among the very worst experienced by Allied prisoners: 454 of 580 (78%) Australians died, mostly from starvation. After the war, supplies of Red Cross food and medicine parcels were found near POW camps on Ambon – had they been distributed by the Japanese, some men might have been saved. The Ambon prisoner group taken to Hainan Island endured similarly grim conditions. By June 1945, continual protests had led to a slight improvement in the food situation, but it was largely too little too late for the POWs there. An Australian medical officer was ordered to remove ‘starvation’ as a cause of death on death certificates, and was warned that his captors ‘would show [the prisoners] what was really meant by starvation unless it was altered.’

3. Borneo

Australian POWs were held in four main camps in Borneo: Sandakan, Kuching (an officers-only camp), Labuan and Jesselton. Of these, Sandakan in North Borneo contained the majority of Australians. Conditions were bad in 1942, but things were to get worse. In January 1945, as the tide of the war was starting to turn, the Japanese, fearing an Allied invasion, began a series of forced marches from Sandakan to Ranau – a distance of 260 kilometres along jungle tracks. Weak and sick prisoners starved to death on the way as food became scarcer. They had no medical supplies and the terrain was muddy and treacherous. If a man collapsed and could not get up, he was usually shot dead by the Japanese.

More marches followed until all the POWs had left Sandakan. By the end of the war only six Australians of the 2,500 Allied POWs had survived the ordeal.
4. The Burma-Thailand Railway

While Allied POWs were held across Asia, it is those camps along the Burma-Thailand Railway during 1943 which remain most resonant for Australians in the Second World War POW experience; largely due to the fact that 9,500 Australians worked on the railway and nearly 7,000 survived to tell the story.

The Railway stretched 421 kilometres, from Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma, the aim being to provide the Japanese with a land access route from South East Asia to supply their large army in Burma. Some 62,000 Australian, British and Dutch POWs (as well as a smaller group of American POWs and estimates of 270,000 Asian indentured labourers) occupied camps along the length of the line, moving from one site to the next as work progressed.

Japanese engineers estimated that the Railway, to be built through jungle and mountain, would take five years to construct and require thousands of engineers. Instead it took under a year, using starved and diseased POW labour.

POWs endured hellish boat and train rides, and marched for days to reach the part of the jungle where they would begin laying railway line. Many did not survive these trips. POWs would sometimes find themselves having to build their camp and latrines from scratch, after an exhausting journey. Railway work involved clearing dense jungle, carting logs, laying railway lines and roads, building bridges, and often cutting through bare rock with few tools. Quotas of lengths of line to be laid on the Railway were stipulated daily, and as time went on, these quotas continued to increase. Every day would involve a struggle between Allied officers and their captors over who would go out to work; medical officers in particular constantly arguing against the inclusion of very sick men. Often the Japanese would demand 80% of a camp to work, when all were weak and ill. If the guards disagreed with a medical officer’s diagnosis of a patient’s illness, they would beat the doctors, and force the sick men out to work anyway. This was a daily occurrence and those that died during the day were carried back by the others to be cremated.

By mid-1943 the Japanese, under increasing pressure to complete the project because of advancing Allied forces, demanded more men to work longer - often 16 hours daily, with no days off, never seeing their camps in daylight - and for less food. Men were being fed 250-300 grams of rice and a few beans per day, and rarely any meat.

The daily deprivation, misery and humiliation of this situation is impossible to comprehend. Some 12,000 Allied POWs died on the Railway, including 2,646 Australians. That the building of the Railway exacted such a brutal toll is no surprise, considering the terrible state of the workers’ health, the terrain through which they had to build, the climate of torrential monsoon rain and extreme heat and the lack of adequate engineering tools and supplies. The Railway was completed in mid-October 1943 but it was never used. Almost as soon as it was completed, it was damaged by Allied bombing. Today only sections of it survive.

5. Japan

Almost 3,000 Australian POWs experienced camps on the Japanese home islands. They worked mainly in mines, shipyards, factories or on docks – the last being the best job as prisoners could try to steal food and other supplies while they worked. Unlike other camps, their work party supervisors were usually Japanese civilians, not military personnel. In the majority of cases, these civilian overseers were as harsh towards the prisoners as their military counterparts.

6. Fall of Rabaul

Rabaul, the peacetime capital of the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea, fell to the Japanese on 23 January 1942. The small Australian garrison, Lark Force, was overwhelmed and most of its troops, including six army nurses, captured. Approximately 400 of the troops escaped to the mainland and another 160 were massacred at Tol Plantation. In July 1942, about 1,000 of the captured Australian men, including civilian internees, were drowned when the Japanese transport ship, Montevideo Maru, was sunk by an American submarine off the Philippines coast en-route to Japan. Only the officers and nurses, sent to Japan on a different ship, survived.
II. Civilians and Nurses

Almost 1,500 Australian civilians spent the war in captivity, out of about 130,000 civilians interned by the Japanese. Unlike Allied POWs, Australian civilians each had different backgrounds and stories that led them into simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Their imprisonment was quite different to that of military personnel. The threat of sexual assault or forced sexual slavery for female internees was constant, and one that few men in POW camps needed to fear. Civilians also lacked the cohesion of the military structure, which often made access to food and resources a matter of luck and personal negotiation.

Australian army nurses were another group held in captivity. On 14 February 1942, following the fall of Singapore, 65 nurses were attempting to return to Australia on the ship Vyner Brooke. 12 drowned when the vessel was torpedoed and 21 were massacred after reaching Banka Island. The sole survivor, Nurse Vivian Bullwinkel, managed to hide for days but eventually gave herself up as she had been shot and needed medical attention. This killing of non-combatant women particularly shocked Australians when it was discovered at the end of the war.

The other surviving nurses from the Vyner Brooke saw out the war in a civilian camp in Sumatra. Eight of 32 died in captivity. Although they were not made to work as male POWs were, they were subject to the same deprivations and humiliations at the hands of the Japanese. Six Australian military nurses captured at Rabaul in January 1942 were sent to Japan and all survived the war.

III. POWs in Europe

Some 8,591 Australian personnel spent years as prisoners in European camps. Most of these were infantry captured in 1941 during the campaigns against the Germans and Italians in North Africa, Greece, Crete and Syria. Unlike the thousands captured in Singapore, these men were usually taken in small groups, and sometimes as individuals, such as shot down RAAF aircrew.

Those POWs captured in North Africa were sent to Italian, Greek or German camps. Conditions in these camps varied greatly and were generally poorly organised, particularly those in Bari (Italy) and Salonika (Greece). Camp conditions were filthy and crowded, food was scarce, and many Allied POWs died.

When Italy capitulated in 1943, all POWs in Italian hands were transferred to German control, except for those hundreds who escaped to Switzerland. While officers and other ranks were rarely separated into different camps in Japanese captivity, in the German case this was the rule: officers went to ‘Oflag’ and all other ranks to ‘Stalag’.

When Italy capitulated in 1943, all POWs in Italian hands were transferred to German control, except for those hundreds who escaped to Switzerland. While officers and other ranks were rarely separated into different camps in Japanese captivity, in the German case this was the rule: officers went to ‘Oflag’ and all other ranks to ‘Stalag’.
Although some Allied POWs were put on work parties, most spent their captivity enduring long periods of boredom. While this may have seemed preferable to the experience in Japanese camps, it led to many cases of depression and despair as the war dragged on and no one knew if or when it would end. POWs did whatever they could to keep their minds active, from concerts and plays to teaching courses to even mock cricket ‘test series’ between British and Australian prisoners. Courses on all kinds of subjects were taught to whoever was interested and camp ‘newspapers’ were written. Many POWs chose to be on work parties as it gave them something to do and took them out of the camp confines.

It is a common belief that the Australians held in these camps had it ‘easier’ than their Japanese counterparts, because of satisfactory food and medical supplies and mostly good relations with their captors. There was also the possibility of being repatriated well before the war was over, due to reciprocal prisoner exchanges between the Allied and Axis countries. While there are elements of truth in these generalisations, comparisons between the two groups only serve to diminish the genuine suffering of European POWs. They also returned to a public that was focussed on the stories of Australian POWs in the Pacific and, apart from the stories of the escapes from the German camps, knew little about life in captivity in Europe.

There were two main reasons why Allied prisoners in Europe died in such low numbers compared to their Japanese counterparts: they were generally better treated by the Germans and Italians, and they had access to Red Cross parcels. Usually received by POWs fortnightly, these parcels contained food and supplies which meant the prisoners’ caloric and protein intake was adequate to sustain them. Crucially, medical supplies were given to Allied doctors. POWs were also allowed to regularly send and receive mail – an important morale booster and a way of keeping in touch with loved ones at home.

As with Japanese camps, there was a great deal of variation between German-run POW camps. Some were relatively comfortable and well-provisioned, while others were isolated and surrounded by snow-covered mountains with little access to nearby supply routes.

* Allan S. Walker, Middle East and Far East, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1953, 404-405.
POWs held in Australia

Australia kept its own POWs during the war – both military and civilian. While the treatment of both is generally considered to have been fair, the reasons behind civilian internment in particular remain a contentious issue.

Military POWs

Australia held over 25,000 enemy military personnel during the war. These comprised 5,637 Japanese, 1,651 Germans and the largest group – 18,432 Italian prisoners. Most of these were captured in the North African campaign or were Italian merchant seamen who were in Australia and subsequently interned when war was declared. While all enemy groups were treated according to the Geneva Conventions, the Japanese POWs faced strong feelings of mistrust and resentment from their Australian captors.

Many Italian POWs were paid as farm labourers to help the shortage left by Australian men fighting overseas. For many families involved, this was a positive cross-cultural experience, and many of these ‘workers’ migrated to Australia after the war.

The Cowra Breakout

From 1941, Cowra in western New South Wales was the site of a major prisoner of war camp. The camp housed various nationalities, including German, Italian and more than 1,000 Japanese prisoners. The Japanese, unlike many of the others who seemed to accept their fate, brooded on the dishonour they had brought to themselves, their family and their country by being taken prisoners of war. In 1944, the Australian authorities were informed of an escape planned by the Japanese at Cowra POW camp. They decided to separate the prisoners. On Friday afternoon, 4 August, as required by the Geneva Convention they notified the Japanese prisoners that the officers and NCOs were to be separated from the rest of the men. The men would then be transferred from Cowra to the Hay Prisoner of War Camp on Monday 7 August. Their leaders protested at the separation of the men and they held meetings that night to plan their strategy. A number of the men decided that to be killed while escaping provided them with an opportunity to regain their honour with a glorious death.

At 1.45 am on 5 August 1944, almost 1,000 Japanese POWs, armed with home-made weapons, threw themselves at the camp fences with shrieks of ‘Banzai!’ The surprised guards, members of the 22nd Australian Garrison Battalion, rushed to their posts when the alarm sounded. The prisoners flung themselves over the barbed wire straight into the guards’ line of fire leaving the fence line of the camp littered with bodies. During the next nine days, young recruits from a nearby army training camp assisted in rounding up the escapees. Many of the prisoners committed suicide in the surrounding hills rather than submit to recapture. Others hanged themselves in the camp. More than 100 of the prisoners were wounded and approximately 230 of them died. Three Australians were killed on 5 August and a fourth Australian was killed rounding up the escapees.

Civilian Internees

During the First World War the Australian Government interned around 7,000 Australian residents; men, women and children, in the interests of ‘national security’. These residents were termed ‘enemy aliens’ - citizens of countries at war with Australia. This also included British nationals of German ancestry already residents in Australia.

By the Second World War, increasing paranoia about Japan’s geographical proximity and possible attacks on Australian soil led to the roundup and internment of Japanese nationals. Later years of the war saw Germans and Italian civilians interned on the basis of nationality, particularly in northern Australia, where significant German and Italian migrant communities existed. Approximately one-fifth of all Italians resident in Australia, one-third of Germans and almost all Japanese became internees during the war. Almost all were released towards the end of the war or at its end, except for those of Japanese origin. They were forcibly ‘repatriated’ to Japan, including some who were Australian-born.

Internees were accommodated in makeshift camps around Australia, often in remote country locations. By 1942, more than 12,000 people were interned in Australia, over half of these sent by other Allied forces to Australia. It is easy to understand how many civilian internees would have felt hard done by, some having lived in Australia all their lives and raised families here.

The Korean War 1950-1953

Japan annexed (forcibly incorporated) Korea in 1910 and after their defeat in the Second World War, lost all its foreign territories, including Korea. The two post-war world superpowers – the USA and the Soviet Union – stepped in.

In what would ultimately be a disastrous move, the United States and the Soviet Union divided the Korean peninsula into two zones of control: the South, under
western, capitalist American influence; and the North, under Soviet and Chinese communist influence. The two Koreas were divided at the 38th parallel, an arbitrary division chosen by American General Clarence Bonesteel III, without "any regard for political boundaries, geographical features, waterways, or paths of commerce."

This artificial division of Korea became increasingly untenable and from 1945-1950, tension between the two governments of the North and South escalated. On June 25 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea. The UN Security Council then invited member states to send forces to try to stabilise the situation. The USA and British Commonwealth countries contributed the most significant personnel numbers, Australia being the first country following the USA to commit units to the defence of South Korea.

With the entry of millions of Chinese troops to back-up North Korean forces in November 1950, UN troops were pushed back down the peninsula and south of the 38th Parallel. Soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR) fought two important battles at Maryang San and Kapyong during 1951, and were joined by the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (1RAR), in April 1952. The last two years of the war were characterised by trench warfare and little movement on either side. A ceasefire was agreed on 27 July 1953 in Panmunjom.

Twenty-nine Australian servicemen were captured by North Korean and Chinese forces during the Korean War. The treatment of Australian POWs in Korea was generally better than that meted out by the Japanese to POWs during the Second World War. However, many Australian POWs were kept in appalling conditions and it is incredible that almost all survived. Private H. R. Madden, 3RAR, was captured during the Battle of Kapyong. Already ill when captured in April 1951, he died of a combination of malnutrition and disease just seven months later. He was posthumously awarded the George Cross for resisting interrogation and for his generosity with fellow prisoners. A fellow POW remembered that Madden always insisted in sharing his food with others who needed it, even though all were hungry.

Five Australians endured captivity for over two years, captured in the first half of 1951. They suffered long years of brutal treatment for their "uncooperative" attitude, from starvation to frequent beatings and torture. North Korean and Chinese captors, having not been signatories, largely ignored the articles of the 1949 Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs.

Sixty three per cent of UN forces' POWs were captured in the first six months of the war and initially were held by North Korean captors. Eventually all POWs were marched north to a series of POW camps along the Yalu River, and were turned over to Chinese captors. While conditions under the Chinese were considered better than under the North Koreans, the Chinese guards severely punished prisoners that openly practiced religion, and often refused to let medical personnel treat POWs.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of captivity in the Korean War was the Chinese captors' attempts to indoctrinate western prisoners with ideals of communism and anti-capitalist rhetoric. This program of 're-education' took three forms – forced labour, intelligence extraction (through repeated interrogation and/or torture) and indoctrination – daily, hour-long lectures and exams, followed by group discussions and essay-writing. While American POWs were the main targets, in a war fought between rival ideologies, these attempts to 'brainwash' were seen as an important propagandist tool for the communist cause. Ultimately the program was unsuccessful in converting the great majority of UN troops and was eventually abandoned.

In general, Australian POWs in Korea suffered many of the same trials as those of the Japanese – neglect, hunger and brutality – but in the biting cold of a Korean winter. Unlike Australian POWs of other wars, they also had to withstand sustained attacks on their minds and beliefs.

Pyoktong, North Korea, 1952-53. Propaganda photograph of POWs eating apples in the other ranks POW Camp, Pytong, in the winter 1952-53, when the temperature dropped as low as -43 degrees F.
Epilogue

The experiences and stories of all Australian POWs in wars must be remembered. But it is equally important to keep the POW experience in context. Though all suffered, the vast majority survived to return home. Through all these conflicts, millions of people, both military and civilian, were killed, injured or made homeless. In the First World War, more than 20 million people died. During the Second World War while thousands of Allied prisoners worked on the Burma-Thai Railway or starved to death in other camps, eight million civilians were murdered by the German military. Millions more civilians died in Russia and China during that period. Thousands of female POWs of the Japanese became sex slaves - called ‘comfort women’. Japanese forces also conducted medical experiments on Chinese civilians. During the Korean War, while 29 Australian prisoners suffered in captivity, it is estimated that more than two million Korean civilians died.

Captivity tends to be seen in a wholly negative context. Yet many POWs talk of the positive consequences of their captivity experience: sharing humour in the darkest times, seeing bravery and ingenuity in fighting their circumstances, and experiencing unbreakable friendships during captivity and afterwards.

For every story of deprivation and suffering, there is one of generosity, sacrifice for a fellow prisoner and the indomitable will to survive. In the case of the Second World War, while so many Australian POWs died, more survived and returned to Australia to raise families and have careers. The lifetime bonds that tie these people to each other are of a strength and intensity that few people will ever experience – either in war or peace.

But oral history is now seen as an important, additional resource to the written record, as well as a way for people to actively engage with history through talking to those who affected it. There now exist many professional, international oral history associations (such as the Oral History Association of Australia www.ohaa.net.au), with standardised guidelines about how to practise it, how to archive and preserve oral history, and how to distribute it online.

The Australians at War Film Archive is the largest oral history database of its kind in the world. It contains interviews with Australians from all our wars, conflicts and peacekeeping missions from the First World War to the present day. It encompasses the battlefront, the home front, media and entertainment, children, teachers, wives, workers, prisoners and clerics. From signaller to Spitfire pilot, from soldier to stoker, even to those who fought with us and those who fought against us; as long as they are Australian citizens, then everyone who was in any way involved is represented. Over two thousand interviews, from every state and territory, covering the First World War, the Second World War, the Occupation of Japan, the Korean War, the Malayan Emergency, Indonesian Confrontasi, the Vietnam War, Gulf War One and the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Archive also interviewed men and women who have seen service in UN and other operations in places such as the Sinai, Israel, Kashmir, Cambodia, Rwanda, Somalia, Bougainville and East Timor, along with Defence Force operations after the Rabaul tidal wave and the bombing in Bali.

The Archive is organised into over 200 categories with, wherever possible, at least ten interviews in each category. The methodology was simple - to place the war/conflict experience in the context of the individual’s entire life, and to incorporate social and cultural questioning. Each interview begins from childhood, continues to the war/conflict experience and concludes with some questioning regarding post war life. Consequently, the Australians at War Film Archive is now a remarkable resource of Australian social and cultural life from about 1914 till today.

Oral history, particularly sixty or so years after the event, is inevitably a flawed exercise. Memory is prejudiced, subjective and subject to fault. The stories that people tell will often confine time and space, limit the number of characters and the actions that took place, and promote the personal over the institutional. In the best sense, the people interviewed by the Archive are speaking for themselves, bringing to life an important experience from their past, describing how it felt to be them at an important moment in history.

The Australians at War Film Archive and Oral History

Oral history is the oldest form of human record. Before the written word and before the printing press, people told each other stories that ensured the ongoing survival of their heritage. From Homer’s lyric poems and the Icelandic sagas to African folkloric music, the traditional practice of oral history passed down through generations. In our culture however, oral history has only recently experienced a revival. Oral history had long been seen as ‘unreliable’ compared to the written word, and of course, recorded oral history did not exist before the 20th century – there was no way to preserve it.
For teachers and students who want to engage with veteran-related oral history, there are a few challenges. The first relates to memory. In the Second World War, for example, Australian personnel could find themselves in diverse locations and climates, moving between different theatres of war. With POWs in particular, many moved frequently from camp to camp, and sometimes between different countries. Weeks stretched into months and years and recollections of captivity decades later can therefore become a blur of different places and events.

Secondly, due to the circumstances of captivity, much documentation did not survive. The Japanese forbade all prisoners from keeping written records, conducted constant searches, and severely punished the offenders. So too, in the heat of war, accurate records were not always collected. As a result, if memories are contradictory, there may be few corroborating records in existence.

Particular memories that may be traumatic can be suppressed, and there are often unspoken but unbreakable bonds of group loyalty between veteran groups. This is particularly true of former POWs. They have an extremely strong group identity and hold fast to the idea that if you weren’t there, you can’t understand. This means they are also often reluctant to criticise each other, which can mean obtaining an accurate account of an event is complicated. Oral history can become evidence of what people choose to remember of the past.

The intrinsic value of oral history cannot be discounted. One can just as easily question the validity or accuracy of any document written retrospectively. The interview process allowed the interviewers to ask general questions which often elicited surprising information. They also asked questions for which specific answers were needed. With both, there was the benefit of being able to clarify various aspects of the information given – a difficult task with written sources.

For students in particular, oral history provides a wonderful opportunity for young people to engage with living history – whether it is family members, neighbours, veterans or others in the community. The immediacy of oral history, and the interviewee’s ability to engage with the person and the material, teaches important skills in listening and drawing people out in sensitive and tactful ways. In this resource, students will encounter the memories and reflections of their countrymen and women, their lives, their thoughts, their disappointments, tragedies and occasional small triumphs.
What happened where?

**Geography**

Some of the places where Australians were imprisoned during war now have different names. Find out what these two places are now called:

Formosa

Malaya

Use an atlas to locate the following countries on your world outline map. After you mark each country on your map, write down the war in which Australians were imprisoned in there. Write down where you found this information. To help you get started, visit the Australian War Memorial on-line exhibition site, *The Stolen Years*, at [www.awm.gov.au/stolenyears](http://www.awm.gov.au/stolenyears).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Which war?</th>
<th>Where did I find this information?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Worksheet 3

## Getting to know the veterans

### Gathering information

In the DVD that accompanies this resource you will see and hear interviews with former prisoners of war from the *Australians at War Film Archive*. Forty-one veterans appear throughout the DVD, talking about their experiences. As you view the DVD chapters, use the table below to gather some preliminary information about what happened to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DVD Chapter</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Interviewees’ names</th>
<th>What were the main points?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Capture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Life in the camps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Guards, civilian and internees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Humour and mateship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Food, conditions and treatment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Despair, hope, secrets and escape</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The end of the war, coming home and reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Worksheet 4

Building a profile

Research

Creative writing

Choose one of the people you have seen interviewed on the DVD. Go to the Archive website, www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au and search for that person. Use their transcript to build up a profile of their life and their experience as a prisoner of war. Put your findings in the table below.

*Note to teachers: the full transcripts of all the interviewees from the DVD are also available on the CD-ROM included with this resource.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When and where were they born?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did they do before the war?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank (if he/she was in the forces)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In which war did they serve?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How and when was he/she captured?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was his/her life like as a POW?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You could include:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with guards and other POWs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and entertainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there humorous events in the camp?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there sad events?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did he/she have a close friend?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did he/she ever try to escape?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened to them the day the war ended?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was coming home like?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened in their life after the war?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use the information you have gathered about this person to create a written profile that you can then present to the class.
**Language Games**

**English**
As you listen to the interviews on the DVD, gather a list of the words or phrases used that relate to war. Collect the words in this section and place them alphabetically so that you construct a dictionary. Then include any other words about war that you or your classmates can remember.

To discover the meaning of the words or phrases, take the following steps:
- try to understand the meanings from the context in which they are used;
- look up the word in the dictionary;
- ask your classmates or teachers for explanations;
- ask a veteran what the word means to them; and

Examples are provided to help get you started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word or phrase</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Where did I discover the meaning?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>infantry</td>
<td>Soldiers who are trained to fight on foot</td>
<td>dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMAS</td>
<td>Her (or His) Majesty's Australian Ship</td>
<td>Talking to a navy veteran</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher guided activities
Activity 1

Scaffolding

This is a general activity that could apply to any segment of the DVD. It is simply a way of assisting students to plan and write an essay.

Using a Venn diagram (with three overlapping circles), the student selects three things, for example, three personal stories from people interviewed on the DVD or three attributes that, in the student’s view, most contributed to the survival of prisoners of war, listing important elements relating to each in the outer circles and listing any common elements in the overlap section of the Venn diagram. They should end up with a few key ideas in the central segment that are common to all three.

The students then focus on three of these to create an essay (this assists the student to scaffold the essay). They create dot points for each of the three key ideas. They develop these dot points into paragraphs, with each of the paragraphs relating to one of the original attributes, issues, personal stories etc, which provided the focus for each of the circles of the Venn diagram. The students have to refer to specific examples from the DVD or text to illustrate each of their points.

They then arrange their paragraphs in a logical order. Once they are at this point in the process, the students can work from the following instructions:

**Linking sentence 1** – write a sentence which links your first three paragraphs about (first personal story/attribute/idea) to your three paragraphs about (2nd personal story/attribute/idea).

**Then write linking sentence 2** (linking your three sentences about your second personal story/attribute/idea with your sentences about your third personal story/attribute/idea).

**Conclusion** – summarise your thoughts about why the three elements you discussed are so important to all three of the personal stories/attributes (whatever the focus of the three circles of the Venn diagram was). This should take about 100 words.

**Introduction** – read over your essay and write a paragraph which outlines the three elements you have chosen and why you think they are so important in the Australian Prisoners of War DVD segments.
Activity 2 & 3

Two-minute bursts

Note to teacher: This activity, two-minute bursts, is designed to promote intense thinking in response to a provocative assertion/statement shown to the students.

Some sample assertions and statements:

‘All prisoners of war were brave and courageous.’

‘All prisoners of war were treated badly by their captors.’

‘Prisoners of war were captives. For them, the war was over when they went behind the wire.’

‘Surrender is cowardice.’

Students record their responses in dot-point form, writing as rapidly as possible without much thinking about, or analysis of, the assertion/statement. The students’ responses do or do not support the assertion/statement. They do not have to justify their responses at this stage of the activity.

After the two minutes, the teacher removes the first assertion/statement and puts up the next one, giving the students another two-minute timeslot to write their responses as quickly as possible. Once again, the students’ responses support or refute the assertion/statement.

This process continues until all the assertions/statements have been responded to. The whole process is designed to promote quick responses.

The next stage in this activity is reflective thinking, discussion (in small groups or whole class) and justification of the responses. Students can be asked to choose one (or more) of their responses and write a justification of it. These can then be collected and displayed and become the focus of group or class discussion. Students can be asked to respond to the justification – can they find evidence to support or refute it? Thoughtful and complex discussions can be generated using this technique. It also has the advantage of requiring the students to look for objective evidence to support their viewpoints.

Oral History

This is another general activity that could apply to any of the segments of the Australian Prisoners of War DVD.

The DVD is essentially an oral history of the experiences of men and women who found themselves prisoners of war in some of the conflicts in which Australia has been involved. In a general discussion, teachers pose the question to students as to why oral history is valuable.

Some possible answers could be that oral history frames experience in its historical context. Or that it recognises and celebrates the significance of personal acts of courage, no matter how small or insignificant these appeared to be to the people involved at the time. Or that one way to understand what happened in any event is to ask those who were present.

As a follow-up activity, students could be asked to develop a set of questions to ‘ask’ the people interviewed for the DVD. They would need to think about the following:

- What would be the most interesting questions to ask?
- What questions give you the most interesting answers?
- How can I work out the best questions to elicit the fullest answers?
- What evidence from the DVD do I need to think about myself to develop the best questions?
- If I had the time and opportunity, what would be the most useful research I could do to support developing quality questions?
- What are some of the limitations of oral history? How could the material be corroborated from other sources?

A useful comparison could be drawn by having the students read a section of the transcript of any one of the veterans (which includes the questions asked) and determine for themselves whether they could have asked better questions. How would they have done so?
Worksheet 6

Empathy exercise

You were a Prisoner of War of either the Japanese or Germans in the Second World War. You are now in your 80s and one of your grandchildren is studying prisoners of war at school. You have a box or scrapbook that is filled with items from this time in your life.

Create your box of items or scrapbook. You will present this to your class. It must contain:

■ A description of the specific prisoner of war camp in which you were held.

■ At least ONE diary entry that describes a typical day in the camp.

■ A newspaper clipping about your return home to Australia.

■ At least five artefacts with explanations. These might include: drawings, medals, photographs, badges or anything else that you think could be included.

■ Every item in your box or scrapbook should be dated and include a written explanation to your grandchild of why you saved each item, what they signify and why they are important to you.

Review

In some of the topics, students are invited to reflect on their own feelings or reactions to what they have heard from the interviewees. They may be asked to examine their attitudes or to view current events using history as the basis for their view.

These reflection questions could be answered in a number of ways, by class debate or individual essay, for example.

**History a compulsory subject?**
Debate the suggestion that listening to the experiences of the POWs shows why History should be a compulsory study.

**Young refugees**
Australia is home to refugees from a variety of countries. Like the Australian prisoners of war we have been studying, these young people have often experienced scenes of war and been subject to poor living conditions. Unlike the times when our POWs returned home, society now recognises that individuals who have suffered in this way need ongoing assistance.

Design a wallet card of support services that young people in your local area could contact for assistance in relation to their physical and mental health.

**Precious memories**
Many POWs kept diaries. Finding writing material and implements and hiding the diaries in safe places often presented additional burdens to prisoners already suffering so many privations and difficulties.

- Why would a diary be so precious to POWs?
- How different would their diary entries be to the accounts they are giving in these interviews?
- Is either source more reliable than the other?

_Sydney. 1945 Leading Aircraftman K. Parker, RAAF, an ex-prisoner of war of the Japanese, greeting his mother and sister on his arrival at Mascot Aerodrome from Singapore._