Sydney, Friday, 8 September 1944

On 5 August last month, there was a mass breakout of Japanese prisoners-of-war from the No. 12 Camp, just outside the small NSW town of Cowra. The outbreak was from ‘B Compound’, one of four compounds in the camp. It housed the Japanese non-commissioned officers. Other compounds housed Italian and German prisoners as well as Japanese commissioned officers.

An Australian officer of the 22nd Garrison Battalion has since written: ‘The Japanese did not understand the Articles of the Geneva Convention, and our strict adherence to its terms merely amuses them and further convinces them of our moral and spiritual weakness. They read into our humane treatment of them a desire to placate them, and this we felt sure sprang from our secret fear of them. They are taught that it is honourable to die rather than surrender and all were humiliated at being captured.’

Along with the four Australians killed in the break-out, 234 Japanese died and 108 were wounded. It is believed that 31 Japanese prisoners committed suicide, with 16 of the wounded showed signs that they had also tried to kill themselves. Twelve burnt to death in huts set on fire by the Japanese themselves. Four Australians were killed in the outbreak and another four wounded.

Use the information in this worksheet and in the source listed as a Reference to complete the following activities:

Activities

1. Internment camps in Australia during World War II housed not only service personnel from enemy countries, but also their civilians. Why do you think civilians were imprisoned?

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2. Besides people from countries such as Japan, Germany and Italy, who else could expect to be imprisoned in Australia during the war? Suggest why in each case.

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3. The Cowra camp had a range of facilities such as tennis courts, hospitals and dental clinics. The prisoners were also treated humanely, in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Convention. Use information from the web links listed below, and from SOSE Alive History 2, to compare and contrast this treatment with the way Australian prisoners-of-war (POWs) were generally treated in Japanese POW camps.

4. (a) How do the comments of the 22 Garrison Battalion officer help to explain why the Japanese generally ran their own prisoner-of-war camps in the way that they did?

5. (b) How do his comments help to explain why so many of the escaping Japanese POWs chose to die at their own hands?

6. Based on your further research, write (in English) a letter that a Japanese officer might have written to his wife about this incident. Remember to write it from his point of view. Be prepared to read your completed letters to the class. Afterwards, discuss as a class how different these ‘Japanese’ letters might be from those written by Australian soldiers who defended the camp. Think about how different points of view can create different ‘stories’ about what really happened.