

Australians' Wartime Experiences: Prisoners of war

Our cry once was 'If only we were free' but this waiting is harder to bear than we expected.

Reg Mahoney, Changi prisoner of war, 1945

A prisoner of war (POW) is a person who surrenders to, or is captured by, the enemy during wartime and is entitled to certain protections under international humanitarian law. In this investigation, students examine the history and impact of Australians' experiences as prisoners of war, the conditions they endured and the reasons for their imprisonment.

To the teacher

Recommended levels

Upper primary Lower secondary Middle secondary Upper secondary

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Teachers are warned that students may uncover some disturbing and challenging images when researching this topic.

Background information

For as long as there have been conflicts in human history, combatants have been captured, imprisoned, enslaved, humiliated and often killed as prisoners of war. During both world wars, thousands of Australians were imprisoned in various places around the globe. During World War II, millions of people were imprisoned in Europe. Australian servicemen and women died in battle or from disease, malnutrition and slave labour in Asia, the South Pacific, Europe and the Middle East. The stories of prisoners of war, which encompass the daily grind of struggling to survive in the face of malnutrition, disease, backbreaking work, mistreatment and the unending boredom of imprisonment, are often difficult to confront. However painful, a knowledge of the brutalities of life as a prisoner of war serves as a poignant reminder that wars are about people, their suffering and sometimes their survival. The stories of prisoners of war are often filled with grief, tragedy and despair, but also a courageous determination to make it home.

In World War I, Australia fought as an ally of the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth nations, as well as France and the USA, against Turkey and Germany; over 4000 Australians were imprisoned during this war. During World War II, Australia fought as an ally of the USA, the United Kingdom and other



Prisoner of war (POW) Corporal Frederick J McAlister and another POW tending to some farming equipment. They were prisoners at Camp 13C at Hammelberg am Main, Germany.

AWM P02507.002

Commonwealth nations against Germany, Italy and Japan; over 30 000 Australian servicemen and women were held captive during this period and many died.

The first Geneva Convention, which related to the treatment of the sick and wounded during times of war, was signed in 1864; the last ones were signed in 1949, and there were two further protocols in 1977. In this unit, students are encouraged to read extracts from the Geneva Conventions relating to the treatment of prisoners of war and to research whether Australian prisoners of war were treated fairly and according to the Articles of the Geneva Conventions during World War II. Students use web-based resources to research where Australians were imprisoned as prisoners of war in Asia, Europe and the Middle East; how they were treated; their experiences; and their personal stories of imprisonment. For the last activity, students research prisoners of war in Australia with a special focus on the 1944 breakout in Cowra, New South Wales.

Historical literacies

Events of the past
Research skills
Historical concepts
ICT understandings
Making connections
Representational expression
Moral judgement in history
Historical explanation

Indicators of student achievement

At the end of this unit students should be able to:

- **state** where Australians were imprisoned during World War II
- **describe** some experiences of Australian prisoners of war and prisoners of war in Australian prison camps
- **explain** some of the Articles of the Geneva Conventions relating to the treatment of prisoners of war
- **make a judgement about** whether Australian prisoners of war were treated according to the relevant Articles of the Geneva Conventions.

Introductory activity: The Geneva Conventions and prisoners of war

- 1 Divide students into pairs and ask them to discuss with their partners the rights that combatants and civilians respectively should have when captured by an enemy, and to draw up two separate lists of these rights. Compile two class lists of the rights that students mention most frequently. Ask students to visit the Global Issues Publishing Group website and follow the links listed below to locate 'A Brief History of the Laws of War', which includes a history of the Geneva Conventions.

www.globalissuesgroup.com > Geneva Conventions > History

Ask students to write brief notes on the following people and dates, using information provided in the 'Brief history': sixth century BCE, Hindu Code of Manu, Hugo Grotius, Henri Dunant, 1899, 1925, 1929, 1949 and 1954.

Have students read the sections on 'International Rules about Soldiers' and 'International Rules about Civilians' and compare the two lists of rights developed by the class with those rights outlined in the summaries of the Conventions in these sections. Ask students to find out whether Germany, Italy and Japan were signatories to the 1929 Geneva Conventions.

- 2 This task requires students to explain one Article of the Geneva Conventions. As the Conventions are quite complex, it is intended to give students a broad understanding of them only.

Refer students to the text of the third Convention, and have them rewrite one of the Articles between 13 and 40 in plain English, and explain it to the rest of the class.

www.globalissuesgroup.com > Geneva Conventions > Convention Texts > Convention III

Activity 1: Prisoners of war during World War II – a mapping activity

This short mapping activity is designed to give students a visual overview of where Australians were imprisoned during World War II and to provide students with a reference point for further research. It can be completed individually or in small groups.

Working the web

Ask students to go to the Encyclopedia section of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) website and download the information on prisoners of war under the subject headings listed below. (Note that some of this information is concerned with where Australians were captured and some with their destination after capture.)

www.awm.gov.au > Encyclopedia >
 > Prisoners of war – First World War
 > Prisoners of war – Second World War: Prisoners in Europe
 > Prisoners of war – Second World War: Prisoners of the Japanese
 > Prisoners of war – Second World War: Prisoners of the Japanese: Civilian internees, Pacific and South-East Asia
www.dva.gov.au > Media Centre > Publications > Commemorative Publications > Laden, Fevered, Starved

Encourage students to follow the links in these documents to gain more detailed information about prisoners of war. Following their reading of this information, have students list the places where Australians were either captured or imprisoned and to indicate these on a world map.



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Quilt made by civilian women internees in Changi prison, 1942.

Identifying and analysing

Conduct a class discussion on changes to place names and any difficulties students may be encountering during the research phase. Ask students to consider the following in preparation for subsequent activities:

- Why might Japan, Germany and Italy have sent Australian prisoners of war to the specific destinations they chose?
- How far did Australian prisoners of war have to travel to reach their destinations?
- How might the climates of Asia, the Middle East and Europe have affected Australian prisoners of war?

To locate up-to-date maps that provide information about changes to place names, students should consult a web-based encyclopedia or search engine and enter the place name followed by '+map'.

www.encyclopedia.com

Presenting the findings

Ask students to check their maps for accuracy against other students' maps and ensure that their maps contain enough information to be used as a reference for the activities to follow.

Activity 2: Australian prisoners of war during World War II

In this activity, students will be asked to consider the following focus questions in relation to Australian prisoners of war:

- 1 How did prisoners of war help each other during their imprisonment?
- 2 Were there any differences between the treatment of prisoners in Asia, Europe and the Middle East?
- 3 What caused the deaths of prisoners of war?
- 4 Where were the greatest numbers of deaths of prisoners of war?
- 5 What was daily life like for prisoners of war?
- 6 Were prisoners of war treated according to the Articles of the Geneva Conventions?
- 7 Who were some of the better known heroes among prisoners of war?
- 8 Were defence force personnel and civilian prisoners of war treated differently?
- 9 How were prisoners of war repatriated?
- 10 How are prisoners of war commemorated?

Ask students to research these questions by searching for web-based images and text.

Working the web

Because of the vast amount of information on the web on prisoners of war, encourage students to work in groups with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for specific areas of research. In searching for information, encourage students to use the place names they encountered in Activity 1, such as Changi, Rabaul, Sandakan, Burma, Borneo, Germany, Poland and Austria, as well as generic terms such as POW, memorials, commemoration, nutrition and repatriation.

Locate the following images of prisoners of war on the AWM website, entering the appropriate image numbers on the Collections Search page.

www.awm.gov.au > Collection Databases > Collections Search
 P00270.019 P01522.015 019199 096862 115953 128455

Ask students to 'read' the images and record their observations under the following headings: 'What I see in the image' and 'Which, if any, of the focus questions does this image and the summary beneath it answer?'. As a way of beginning their text file research, have students conduct searches on the following topics at the AWM website to access the stories of individual prisoners of war.

www.awm.gov.au > Search
 > Sir (Ernest) Edward 'Weary' Dunlop
 > Clarence Williams, Royal Australian Engineers, Malaya
 > Sergeant Jack O'Donnell
 > Reg Mahoney
 > POW Camp newsletters – Europe
 > John Quinn (Petty Officer on a variety of DEMS (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships))

Identifying and analysing

Hold a class discussion with students on the information they are gathering, and discuss how they are keeping track of their information. Ask students to outline the points of view presented in specific images and documents they have selected and to compare these with other items. Discuss whether the images and documents are providing sufficient information on the issues raised in the focus questions.

Presenting the findings

Ask students to complete the following tasks based on their research:

- 1 A written report discussing whether Australian prisoners of war in Asia, Europe and the Middle East were treated according to the Articles of the Geneva Conventions. Students will need to compare the treatment of prisoners



Prisoners of war working as lumberjacks at Stalag XVIIIa, Wolfsberg, Austria, c 1944.

AWM 18_SuK13740

in two or three different contexts and establish the degree to which the Articles of the Geneva Conventions were observed.

- 2 A poster using visual images and text to support the contention students made in their report for the first task.

Activity 3: The Cowra breakout

Prisoners of war were imprisoned in camps all over Australia after being captured in the theatres of war in Asia, the South Pacific and the Middle East. In this activity, students investigate the Australian prisoner-of-war camp at Cowra, New South Wales, with a specific focus on the breakout of August 1944. Students read eyewitness accounts of this episode and come to conclusions about how prisoners of war were treated in Australia. Students explore some of the reasons for the Cowra breakout and hypothesise as to why Japanese prisoners planned this mass escape.

In this activity, students will be asked to consider the following focus questions:

- 1 What were conditions like at the Cowra prison camp?
- 2 Why did Japanese prisoners of war attempt to escape from Cowra?
- 3 Why are eyewitness accounts valuable in the study of history?

Working the web

Students should first view the slide show of the Cowra breakout, which includes images from the AWM and is on the Cowra Shire Council's website. It provides a succinct visual overview of the camp and the way in which the breakout unfolded.

www.cowra.local-e.nsw.gov.au > search > Cowra breakout > 60th anniversary of Cowra breakout > Cowra breakout slide show

For a more detailed description, ask students to read 'The prison breakout at Cowra, August 1944' on the AWM website and respond to these questions:

- How did the Japanese prisoners of war respond to the Articles of the Geneva Conventions, according to an officer of the 22nd Garrison Battalion?
- What evidence is there that the Japanese had planned their escape in advance?
- How did the Japanese escapees die?

www.awm.gov.au > Encyclopedia > Cowra breakout

Eyewitness accounts

Audio interviews and transcripts of interviews with eyewitnesses of the Cowra breakout are rich sources of primary resource material. The interviews with the following eyewitnesses can be found by entering the number given into the Collection Databases search field on the AWM website.

- Keith McGuiness (S00931) was a guard at the Cowra prisoner of war camp at the time of the breakout. He was shot during the breakout and gives a first-hand account of the conditions of the camp.
- Margaret Weir (S00932) was known as ‘the daughter of the lady who fed the Japanese during the breakout’. Mrs Weir’s mother served tea and scones to a few of the escapees, and in her interview Margaret Weir recounts reunions with two of the escapees: one that took place in Cowra on the fortieth anniversary of the breakout and a later one in Japan at the house of Mr Kawaguchi.
- Tom Cusack (S00933) was a switchboard operator at the Cowra prisoner of war camp at the time of the breakout. He gives a first-hand account of the breakout and the conditions of the camp.
- Len Whitely (S00954) was a solicitor and a councillor for the Shire of Cowra. He discusses where the prisoners and internees came from, the economic and social impact of prisoners on the town and his views on why the prisoners attempted the breakout.

www.awm.gov.au > Collection Databases > Collections Search

Identifying and analysing

Hold a class discussion on why the Japanese prisoners planned an escape while the Italian prisoners did not. Ask students what evidence they have found of the treatment of prisoners of war at the Cowra camp (they will need to refer closely to the eyewitness accounts they have located in answering this question).

Making connections

Students may be unfamiliar with Japanese culture, social mores and social organisation during World War II, and a brief explanation of these may be necessary. In addition, ask students to use a web search engine to research the concept of *Bushido*, the strict code of conduct and ethical training that contributed to the rise of Japanese nationalism during World War II.

Presenting the findings

In this activity, students participate in a role play in which various characters state their opinions on the reasons for the Cowra breakout. Students take on the following roles:

- Japanese prisoners of war involved in the breakout
- Italian prisoners of war
- Margaret Weir, Keith McGuiness, Tom Cusack and Len Whitely
- a panel of up to four judges.

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- 1 Why is 'Ruin Ridge' notorious?
- 2 How did Sir (Ernest) Edward 'Weary' Dunlop earn the nickname 'Weary'?
- 3 What was the Burma–Thailand railway?
- 4 What are the Changi murals?
- 5 What slang names did the soldiers give their Japanese and German enemies respectively? Why?

In the roleplay, the prisoners of war and the eyewitnesses all give their own versions of what occurred. Members of the panel of judges interpret this evidence and decide on the reasons for the Cowra breakout.

Going further

- Students who want to conduct further research could use a web search engine to find additional material on prisoners of war or articles on specific topics. Ask them to enter the place name followed by 'POW' to locate a range of data, personal stories and eyewitness accounts.
- Students could make further investigations on the experiences of Australian prisoners of war by contacting their local veterans' organisations, and interviewing prisoners of war and civilian internees. The Commemorations Officer at your State office of DVA may be able to assist in planning this activity. The activity could be extended further by preserving these interviews on cassette or CD-ROM and incorporating them into a local community history project.

Other resources

A Bitter Fate – Australians in Malaya and Singapore December 1941 – February 1942, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002.

Australians on the Burma–Thailand Railway 1942–43, Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, ACT, 2003.

Stolen Years: Australian prisoners of war, Canberra, ACT, Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2002.

The following visual resources are imaginative interpretations of World War II experiences and are therefore not necessarily historically accurate. However, they may present students with some thought-provoking ideas.

A Town Like Alice, 1980, television series starring Bryan Brown and Helen Morse.

Escape from Sobibor, 1987, motion picture starring Alan Arkin and Joanna Pacula.

Paradise Road, 1997, motion picture starring Glenn Close.

Stalag 17, 1953, motion picture starring William Holden and Otto Preminger.

The Bridge on the River Kwai, 1953, motion picture starring William Holden and Sir Alec Guinness.

The Colditz Story, 1954, motion picture starring John Mills and Eric Portman.