



Above: Mrs Weir served teas for the Japanese prisoners of war in this jug. Image courtesy of Lawrence Ryan

Below: Two Japanese escapees enjoy a cup of tea outside the Weir homestead before being taken back to the camp. Photo courtesy of Graham Apthorpe

Mrs Weir's morning teas

By Keiko Tamura

On the morning of Saturday 5 August 1944, Mrs May Weir received unexpected visitors at the family farm, Rosedale, which was about six kilometres from the prisoner-of-war camp at Cowra, the scene of a mass breakout during the night. Three Japanese prisoners dressed in maroon uniform were brought to the house by a farmhand named Stan, while her husband was out working on the farm with Bruce, their teenage son. Mrs Weir was baking in the kitchen and daughter Margaret was playing in the front yard. Calmly she asked Stan what the escapees wanted. Told they wanted some food, she asked them to go to the side verandah and wait till the scones were baked. In the meantime, Margaret ran off to

despite the authorities' evident disgust, that they should be given scones and tea before being led away, as she felt sorry for them "spending a week in the cold with very little shelter and sustenance".

On the 40th anniversary of the Cowra breakout in 1984, Mr. Kawaguchi, one of the three prisoners at Mrs Weir's first morning tea, visited Cowra. He wished to meet Mrs. Weir again. However, she had already passed away. Margaret and Bruce invited him back to the farmhouse. When they brought out the "teapot" – just a jug really – their mother had used that day he recognised it immediately. A few years later, Margaret was invited to Japan to talk about the incident at a History Teachers Association meeting. She took the jug with her to show to the audience. While there she also visited Mr Kawaguchi and his family in Kobe, where she was welcomed warmly.

But why a jug, not a teapot? Recently I had an opportunity to put this question to Bruce Weir, who remembers the incident well. He said that his mother used to give food and tea to swagmen who wandered the countryside looking for work. Instead of using a teapot, milk jug and sugar bowl, she mixed everything in a jug and poured the warm sweet tea from it. Mrs Weir perhaps did not see the escaped prisoners as dangerous enemies. To her they were people who desperately needed nourishment and care. She provided help, just as she would have to her own countrymen. From my experience of living in Australia for over 20 years, I can confidently say that this is characteristic of Australian people. Face-to-face, Australians treat each other and outsiders as equal human beings without pretence, always ready to help when they see someone in need. 🏠



Bottom: Three surviving ex-Cowra prisoners of war pay their respects to the dead at the 60th anniversary commemoration ceremony in Cowra, on the 5th August 2004.

alert their neighbours.

When Margaret returned from the neighbours, she saw an amazing scene. Her mother was "calmly pouring tea and being the perfect hostess, as always, and chatting away to these strange looking gentlemen". The prisoners were recaptured soon after they left the farmhouse, but not before thanking Mrs. Weir for her hospitality.

A week later, young Bruce stumbled onto another escaped Japanese while out hunting rabbits. He raised the alert alert, and up to 500 soldiers and policemen were sent to the area; they eventually captured two prisoners who had spent a week hiding in the creekbed. When these men were brought back to the farmhouse, Mrs Weir insisted,



AUTHOR

Keiko Tamura is a senior research officer in the Australia–Japan Research Project at the Australian War Memorial.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

Test your knowledge by attempting this quiz. The questions are derived from material contained on the Memorial's website, www.awm.gov.au. Answers will be published in the next issue of *Wartime*.



- 1 Where was Private James Sidney Gunning from? Where did he die?
- 2 How many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are believed to have served in the First and Second World Wars?
- 3 Which two Japanese aircraft are on display in Aircraft Hall?
- 4 Name two Allied aircraft featured in Aircraft Hall?
- 5 What place in Australia suffered the greatest number Japanese air raids?
- 6 Who founded the International Red Cross Committee? What event stimulated his concern?
- 7 What is the name of the poem from which the lines beginning "They shall grow not old ..." come? Who wrote it?
- 8 What role did Vera Deakin play during the First World War?
- 9 Where are the Chalk Badges of Wiltshire actually located? Who made them?
- 10 Who was Sybil Craig?
- 11 How many Australians have served in peacekeeping operations since 1947?
- 12 Where was the first UN peacekeeping operation in 1947?
- 13 How many UN multinational operations have been commanded by Australians?
- 14 When did Australian forces serve at Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral?
- 15 Which Australian units were involved?
- 16 When is Remembrance Day?
- 17 Why was it originally known as Armistice Day?
- 18 How many volumes of the First World War official history series were written by Charles Bean?
- 19 On what day did the Malayan Emergency begin? How long did it last?
- 20 Why is Reg Saunders notable?

ANSWERS TO WARTIME 27 QUIZ

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Charles Bean and John Treloar | 8. The Red Ensign | 14. To control flies |
| 2. 1,104 | 9. 8 August 1900; March 1901 | 15. On the front hooves |
| 3. Four killed and four wounded | 10. Indonesian Foreign Minister
Dr Subandrio, in January 1963 | 16. Salvo |
| 4. Up to 3,000 | 11. Charles Bean | 17. Mena, near the pyramids, during the First
World War |
| 5. Ten | 12. Ted Kenna and Keith Payne | 18. The 2/2nd Battalion |
| 6. Twelve – two with the RAN and ten
with the RAAF | 13. They were horses originally sold through
New South Wales | 19. Meeya |
| 7. 1953 | | 20. With Private Tom Blackhurst in Vietnam |