

# 2.10 Australian prisoners of war

During World War II more than 30 000 Australians became prisoners of war (POWs). Of 8591 Australians captured by the Germans, 97 per cent survived the war. However, of the 21 467 Australians taken prisoner by the Japanese, mostly at the beginning of 1942, almost 8000 died in captivity through executions, beatings, slave labour, starvation and disease.

Most Australian POWs were held in camps in South-East Asia, Korea and Japan. The Japanese military had little respect for the rights of prisoners. Thousands of POWs and conscripted Asians were forced to build the Burma–Thailand railway. Starving men, including some suffering from tropical diseases such as dysentery, malaria, cholera and tropical ulcers, were forced to work for twelve or more hours a day.

## The Sandakan death march

North Borneo was the site of the worst single atrocity against Australian and British POWs. The Japanese had sent almost 3000 POWs to Sandakan to construct an airfield, but in January 1945, 470 of them were forced to march 260 kilometres to Ranau. Only 350 survived the ordeal. In May a second death march was ordered for the remaining 500 Sandakan POWs. They had little food, and those who collapsed were killed; only 203 survived this march. By the end of July only 30 POWs survived at Ranau. Those who remained were shot on 1 August. Of the original 3000, only six Sandakan POWs survived. Seven had escaped into the jungle and been cared for by villagers, but one died before they were rescued.

**Source 1** A modern artist's impression of life in a Japanese POW camp in South-East Asia

- A** Japanese officers believed in the bushido code of the Japanese warrior, which states that prisoners are disgraced persons. Hence, there was seldom any compassion shown for the lot of the prisoners.
- B** Food was scarce. Each prisoner was allowed one cup of water and a small portion of corn, soy meal and rice each day. There was no meat, fruit or vegetables. Towards the end of the war, rations were halved.
- C** The Japanese did not recognise Australian nurses as military personnel. Therefore they denied them the rights given to other military prisoners, such as the Red Cross packages and the supplies needed to write home. Some women were treated very brutally.
- D** Camps were rife with diseases caused by malnutrition, mosquitoes, poor sanitation and overwork. Many soldiers arrived at the camp suffering combat injuries. Those POWs with medical training cared for the sick and injured as best they could. There were few medical supplies.
- E** At least 12 Indigenous Australian servicemen were among the Australian POWs captured by the Japanese.
- F** Escape was difficult, but not impossible. Any escapee who was recaptured was usually executed.

**Source 2** A description by Private Stan Davis of POWs in Outram Road prison in Singapore

The whole of their bodies were covered with scabs, and they were so thin there was no muscle anywhere ... It was frightening. Just looking at them, you wouldn't know how they could still live.

**Source 3** Recollections of Sylvia McGregor, a member of the Australian Army Nursing Service who became a POW when Singapore fell

You cannot explain to anybody what it is to be hungry and there is nothing to eat and no way of getting any ... some of the Indonesian women showed us what plants you could eat ... In some camps they would bring you in food and put it outside the barbed wire. Now, if you went out, there were guards there all the time and you were shot.

**G** Forced labour tasks ranged from clearing land to building railroads and bridges.

**H** Punishment — in the form of withdrawing food, forcing the sick or injured to work, being locked in a bamboo box placed in the sun, being beaten, or even killed — was meant to deter further disobedience.

**I** Mateship was maintained by Australian soldiers, even under the most difficult circumstances. Soldiers shared the workload, as well as the food and money.

## Activities

Student workbook  
2.4

### EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- Outline the reasons for the high death rate in Japanese POW camps.
- Why did the Japanese military treat POWs and enslaved civilians cruelly?
- Calculate the percentage of Australian prisoners of the Japanese who died during the war.

### ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- Explain what you can learn about the experiences of Australian POWs from each of the sources in this spread.

### PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- Explain how the experiences of Australian POWs would have affected Australian attitudes to Japan after the war.

### HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

- Use the internet and your library to find out who Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop was and why he was revered by many Australian POWs.
- Use the internet to investigate the breakout of Japanese POWs at Cowra, in western New South Wales, and what that incident reveals about Japanese attitudes during World War II.

