

Teachers' Notes for *Battlefield: One Boy's War*

Written by Alan Tucker

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Alan Tucker recently moved to the city after more than thirty years living in the country. He is an author, illustrator, artist and teacher. He says that researching and writing a book requires the writer to spend many weeks alone in his / her own thoughts and alone and quietly working in public libraries or other writing spaces. Slowly the facts help shape the plot, characters form, relationships evolve and a tale is told. Both his fiction and non-fiction have won numerous awards.

Alan is particularly interested in Australian history. He finds the story of the breakout at Cowra interesting not so much because of the tragic events that occurred there but for what happened next, starting with the respect displayed between many locals and escapees in the days after the escape. In subsequent years several other uplifting things have happened as a result of this incident. The Cowra RSL have cared for the Japanese graves, former POWs have returned to Cowra from Japan and along with local Cowra citizens have raised money for a proper war cemetery. There has also been the building of the beautiful Australian-Japanese garden; the presentation of the United Nations Peace Bell to Cowra (the only one in Australia) and the many exchanges between subsequent generations of Cowra and Japanese students and citizens.

Synopsis

It's 1944 and the height of World War Two, all protagonist Barry Blacker wants to do is become a soldier for the Australian Army. Barry wants to be a soldier so he can rescue his older brother who is currently incarcerated in a Japanese POW camp. Barry is extremely dedicated to his cause and practises to be a soldier on his family's farm in Cowra. He learns to shoot a gun from his father who was a soldier in World War One. His father teaches Barry to respect his weapon and the damage it can cause. Barry listens carefully to his father but dreams of the day when he can use his gun on a real enemy and become a hero.

Barry plays army games with his somewhat reluctant sisters and practices the skills he thinks he will need as a soldier. In the absence of his beloved big brother Barry forms a bond with his older sister's boyfriend John who teaches him tactics through their many games of chess.

Although the main battles of the war are occurring overseas the people of Cowra are reminded of the war on a daily basis because there is a POW camp in the town holding Italian and Japanese prisoners. Barry becomes increasingly interested in the camp and sneaks out of home several times

in order to observe the prisoners. One night as Barry is hiding nearby the camp he witnesses an extraordinary event in Australia's history, the planned breakout of Japanese prisoners from the Cowra camp. Caught up in the action Barry finds that his hiding place is no longer safe and he starts a perilous journey home. On the way he discovers his twin sister Margaret has been following him and needs help to get home because she has a sprained ankle. They make it back to their house just in time for their father to alert the whole family to the breakout. Everyone in Cowra is now on the alert as many Japanese prisoners have escaped and are making their way across country through people's farms and properties.

The family spends a tense few days holed up in their own home as they wait for news that the prisoners have been captured. The town is baffled by the Japanese soldiers' attitudes towards life and death. With all the death and horror he has witnessed firsthand, Barry begins to doubt whether he is cut out to be a soldier after all.

After most of the prisoners have been killed or recaptured, Barry and Margaret find fresh footprints on their farm and decide to recapture a Japanese prisoner by themselves. Forgetting his dad's advice, Barry takes a loaded gun with him and he and Margaret form a plan to lure out the hidden POW. Everything is going according to plan until Barry's clothing catches on some barbed wire and his gun discharges. He watches in horror as he realises he has shot his sister Margaret by accident. The Japanese POW helps Margaret to the house and dresses her wound. Barry finally realises the seriousness of wielding a weapon and is wracked with guilt.

After this episode Barry is able to see a new side to Japanese soldiers and recognises that he is not ready for "war and dead people". Fortunately Margaret is not seriously injured and the Japanese soldier reminds Barry that he has had a lucky escape.

In the last section of the novel a grown-up Barry writes from today and talks of his brother's return home and what happened to his family. The novel ends with a message of hope; that war should be avoided at all costs and that reconciliation is possible even after great tragedy.

Discussion Points and Activities

Before Reading

- Students should have a brief outline of Australia's involvement in World War One and World War Two before reading the novel. Students could each complete a research project on a different aspect of Australia's involvement in these wars.
- Students could be introduced to the idea of POW camps and particularly the experiences of Australian soldiers in Japanese POW camps.

- Question for discussion: What do you know about Australian country life? Students could be asked to find pictures of Australian country life in the 1940s. The class could then discuss what these pictures show.
- There is language in this novel that would be perceived as racist today. It would be a good idea to explain to students before reading the differences in the use of language in Australia in the 1940s.
- Students could complete a research project on the town of Cowra looking at things such as location, history, population etc.
- Considering that this is a true story, students could research the historical circumstances of the Cowra breakout. The following three websites could form a starting point for this research.
<http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww2/anecdotes/cowra.html>
<http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/cowra/index.asp>
http://www.cowratourism.com.au/The_Cowra_Breakout_p114.aspx

While Reading

- What is Barry's view of war at the start of the novel? Why do you think he has this view?
- Looking at the narrative from a different viewpoint: Students could write a diary entry of an important event in the novel from the point of view of another character, e.g. Margaret.
- Barry plays football and chess. What does he learn from both these games?
- Discuss Barry's attitude to Japanese and Italian people and soldiers. Why do you think Barry thinks this way?
- What have you learned about country life from this book?
- Why do you think Barry spends so much time spying on the POW camp?
- Why do you think Barry's dad doesn't talk to him about his experiences as a soldier in World War One?
- What do you think about Barry's efforts to go without food and sleep to train his body for a war situation?
- Do Barry's experiences of farm life affect his thoughts on death? Look at the Francis the pig episode. Compare Barry, Margaret and the twins' reactions to this episode.
- What do Barry and Margaret learn from the episode at the swimming hole? What do you think about the reaction of their parents?
- When is it that Barry first feels the horror of war, killing and bloodshed? When does he start to doubt that he is cut out to be a soldier?

- How would it have felt to be on an isolated farm waiting for escaped prisoners to possibly come past? You could do a piece of descriptive writing on this from the point of view of one person waiting inside Barry's house.
- Why do Barry and Margaret decide to go after the escaped Japanese prisoner by themselves?
- What does Barry learn from the nearly tragic incident with Margaret and the escaped prisoner?
- What does the Japanese prisoner mean when he tells Barry "You are lucky the girl will not die or you would carry a mountain inside you forever?"

After Reading

- Students could write a diary entry about an event that totally changed their opinion about something.
- Students could write a newspaper article about the Cowra breakout.
- Students could watch parts of the TV miniseries "The Cowra Breakout" (1984). Note: This series carries an M rating so students may not be able to watch certain sections.
- Students could be asked to look at newspaper and internet articles about Australian soldiers and their current involvement in wars around the world.
- Students could do a research project on the Geneva Convention and what it says about prisoners of war. The following website could be a place to start.
<http://www.icrc.org/IHL.NSF/FULL/305?OpenDocument>
- As additional texts students could examine some war poetry, both poetry that glorifies war, e.g. Rupert Brooke and poetry that deals with the harsh realities of war e.g. Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.
- Students could write an essay on the topic: 'How does Jack's idea of being a hero change throughout the novel?'
- This novel provides a good starting point for activities on examining stereotypes. Students could first examine how Barry stereotypes Japanese and Italian soldiers and then move on to discuss stereotypes that exist in our society today.

Interview with the author

Qn: *How did you first hear about the incident on which Battlefield is based and why did it capture your interest?*

A: I read many books by Australian writers. I bought Harry Gordon's *Voyage From Shame* when it was published in 1994 and read for the first time the story of the Cowra outbreak.

The story captured my interest because I had never heard of the shootings. If 250 Australians had died on Australian soil, their deaths would have been commemorated every year since. The Japanese deaths are not part of the average Aussie's psyche. I decided to find out more about who was involved and why they chose to charge the POW fence line with home-made weapons against armed soldiers.

As I read further I was fascinated by the multitude of good news stories that have been reported in the decades since the breakout. Many good things have come from one brutal incident.

Qn: *Why did you choose to write Barry's story in a diary format?*

A: I have written three books in the *My Australian Story* series. Every story commissioned in that series had to be written in a diary format so when I came to write *Battlefield* I felt confident to continue in that format.

Qn: *Many Australian children know very little about the harsh realities of Australian rural life. What would you like students to learn or understand about rural life from this book?*

A: I lived in the country for many years and continue to teach (via distance education) students in every region of South Australia. I have a feel for rural issues and the many different landscapes, and love the more leisurely lifestyle and simple pleasures of rural life. I hope some of these feelings are communicated in my story. The Australian countryside allows children the joy of roaming free.

Qn: *You mention the bond between twins a lot in this book. Is this a particular interest of yours?*

A: Not really. I grew up with twins who were my age living next door but had no interest in them beyond that of individual friends and playmates. I'm not sure why I chose to develop sets of twins as characters but once I did I read widely and found many interesting character and relationship traits that I could incorporate into my story. I found the distinctive nature of twins' relationships interesting and hope readers do too.

Qn: *Why did you choose to dedicate this book to the Cowra branch of the RSL?*

A: Australian military personnel fought savage battles and brutal man-on-man combats against the Japanese during World War Two. Deep hatreds formed, firstly because of the battles, and secondly because of the inhumane treatment Australian POWs (prisoners of war) suffered at the hands of their Japanese captors.

Soon after war's end a group of men from the Cowra RSL overcame their prejudices against the Japanese to tend the graves of the dead POWs on the outskirts of their town. Their simple act of humanity and respect for the dead is a lesson to us all and has resulted in many on-going benefits to the people of Cowra.

Qn: *Barry is a character with a complex inner dialogue. Why does he find it difficult to share his thoughts and feelings with his friends and family?*

A: I suspect the answer is because he's male rather than female. Men have a different way of

considering their emotions and then expressing them than women. It could also be because Barry has no brothers at home to talk to and / or because his friends at school have different thoughts and feelings and he realises he cannot confidently discuss his emotions and ideas with them.

Qn: *What important lessons does Barry learn from playing football and chess?*

A: 'The team plan' is a common phrase used by Australian football coaches. Barry is ahead of his times because he sees the value of team planning to achieve a goal and then remaining disciplined and working together to achieve the desired outcome. Team sports teach young men and women many positive life lessons.

Chess is obviously a more solitary pursuit than football but it too requires an ability to plan ahead. Players need to plan more than one move ahead in order to achieve their goal: to win the game.

Qn: *This book shows how an Australian family and community have been affected by World War One and World War Two. What would you like students to learn about these wars from your book?*

A: Both wars had devastating effects on Australian individuals, couples, families and communities. Just when the nation had moved on a generation from World War One and was slowly recovering from the tragic losses, World War Two erupted. Many emotional wounds reopened: many painful memories resurfaced. War is good for no-one and the painful legacies last for generations.

Qn: *Barry's father has very strict rules about gun use and fighting fair. Why do you think this is an important message for readers?*

A: Barry's father saw the damage bullets did to human beings in World War One. He cannot talk about what he saw with his son because Barry is too young but he can insist on gun control. He also saw the savagery of trench warfare and the horrors of No-Man's land and as a result he wishes for a fairer way of resolving conflict.

Qn: *Barry is aware that some adults in his life are trying to soften the truth for him or encouraging him not to think about the war. Do you think it is important to be honest with children and answer their questions?*

A: Parents must be honest but diplomatic, depending on the age of the child and the nature of the atrocity under discussion. Unfortunately, today, images on television and the internet provide opportunities for unsupervised children to be confronted by violent material without the wisdom of their parents' adult interpretation.

Qn: *Through his bad experience wounding his sister Barry comes to revise his views about warfare and violence. What would you want readers to consider after realizing this?*

A: We learn from our experiences, especially our mistakes.

Young people immersed in the online gaming culture, where most challenges involve the killing and maiming of other characters, need to realise that weapons used in real life do serious physical and psychological damage to those on the pointy end of the weapon. American television and movies also promote a false glamour associated with guns: guns are too often seen as a way to solve a problem. Their use causes more problems than they solve.

Qn: *When Barry wounds Margaret he realizes that Japanese people are not all the same. Do you think this is an important idea for students to consider in today's world?*

A: The number of refugees is increasing because of the spread of violent conflict into many regions of the world. The Australian Government accepts many refugees and immigrants every year. As Australian citizens we need to be open to their differences and accept that beyond the colour of skin, shape and contour of face, style of hair, and difference in religious beliefs, refugees and immigrants are not that different from us. The world is peopled by a range of interesting human beings with many similar thoughts and emotions.