‘A Fleeting Glimpse of Truth’

A Group Biography of Australia’s Second World War Correspondents

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A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2022

Statement of Originality

I certify that the content of this thesis is the product of my own work. All the assistance received in preparing this thesis and its sources have been acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

Daniel Seaton, September 2022

Abstract

This biographical study has at its centre six of Australia's most notable war correspondents of the Second World War: Kenneth Slessor, Damien Parer, Chester Wilmot, George Johnston, Osmar White and George Silk. There were over 250 Australian war correspondents during the conflict, in contrast to just thirteen during the First World War. This large group was a relatively well-defined professional and social network, within which existed friendships, rivalries, and collaborative endeavours. I argue that to truly understand the individuals who made up this network, we have to consider them not just as a series of separate journalists, but as a dynamic group interconnected in a variety of different ways: their work, social and professional interaction, journalistic ambition and philosophy, artistic interests, and engagement with the Anzac legend, to name a few.

Through a thematic and comparative study of the work and ideas of these six key individuals, alongside a careful consideration of their interaction with each other and the wider group, I supplement our knowledge of why these individuals were historically significant—culturally, politically, and intellectually—and locate them within the historical context of Australian war reportage. A study of their lives and work side-by-side can, therefore, provide a valuable comparative insight into how some of the most distinguished war correspondents of their day approached their work, shaped the narrative of the war, and functioned as part of a wider dynamic group.

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Acknowledgments

I first contacted my supervisor Mark McKenna in late 2017 while I was still living in London with hopes of one day moving to Australia to begin my PhD. From that initial contact, I knew that this was somebody I wanted to work with. This was confirmed when I first walked into his office in late February 2019 as a nervous newcomer to Sydney. I simply could not have written this thesis without his guidance, ideas, encouragement, and support. Beyond all this, however, I consider him a friend who has believed in me every step of the way. When I was close to returning to the UK at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and really struggling amidst the pain of lockdowns and enforced separation from family, it was Mark who convinced me to push on. I cannot thank him enough.

Similarly, James Curran has been a superb auxiliary supervisor who has always displayed a genuine interest in my work. I have hugely appreciated working alongside him on a number of projects and look forward to more in the future. Sincere thanks also go to Penny Russell, whose thoughts and comments on my work made a profound difference to this thesis and gave me the confidence that I was on the right track.

My friends and colleagues at the University of Sydney have also been a great source of encouragement and inspiration, particularly Ryan Cropp, with whom I have had so many helpful discussions since I began my research. My friend Rod Tiffen has also been tremendously helpful in the production of this thesis, and I have always enjoyed our discussions over a game of chess. I have greatly valued his kindness and generosity in taking me under his wing and reading parts of this thesis. I would also like to thank Ben Giordano for his friendship and encouragement for almost a decade now—he is a friend for life. Sincere thanks are also due to Dan Brown for helping me through some tough times.

Others to have been of particularly notable help have been Sally White, Gael Newton, John B. Turner and the late John Loengard. The helpfulness and patience of the staff at the National Library of Australia, the State Library of New South Wales, the National Archives of Australia, and the Australian War Memorial has also been invaluable.

Fundamentally, without the funding and support provided by the Northcote Trust I could not have even begun my PhD in Australia, let alone completed it. The opportunity that they provided to me has changed my life immeasurably and I will be forever in their debt. Particular thanks here must go to the administrators of the Trust, Dale Eaton and Louise Mulley, as well as Margaret Mayston and George Fergusson, whose personal contact with me has been much appreciated.

To my parents, Keith and Elizabeth: thank you for valuing education so highly and for providing me with all the tools I needed to succeed. This thesis is as much your accomplishment as it is mine. I am so grateful.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations appear in the text and footnotes:

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ADPR	Army Directorate of Public Relations
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AJA	Australian Journalists' Association
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DADPR	Deputy Assistant Director of Public Relations
DOI	Department of Information
GOC	General Officer Commanding
MHIS	Military History and Information Section
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NFSA	National Film and Sound Archive of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
NUAUS	National Union of Australian University Students
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RSL	Returned and Services League of Australia
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SWPA	South West Pacific Area

Introduction

The War Correspondent: A Brief Overview

Carved into the oculus erected in memory of Australia's war correspondents in 2015 is the following passage: 'Amid dangers known and unknown war correspondents report what they see and hear. Those words and images live beyond the moment and become part of the history of Australia'.[1] Situated in the picturesque grounds of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, it could not be more symbolically located. If the War Memorial is the beating heart of Australia's collective remembrance of conflict, then this recognition accorded to the country's war correspondents reflects a desire to ensure that their contribution, through print, visual and sound media is incorporated into the national narrative surrounding war. At the unveiling of the oculus, then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that it was 'a memorial to the men and women who do what is so essential in our democracy—hold up truth to power. We are talking today about a tradition of courage, a tradition that is absolutely fundamental to our democracy'.[2]

This framing of war correspondents as truth seekers is a common mode of understanding their work and motives. As will be seen with the individuals considered in this thesis, the stated goal of most war correspondents is to 'tell the truth'—to construct an accurate story for the consumers of their material based on the facts available to them at the time. As Phillip Knightley has observed in the preface to his seminal book, *The First Casualty*, 'the media wants to observe the military in action, bear witness, and record the first draft of history'.[3] In Australia, this approach was exemplified by Charles Bean, the country's Official War Correspondent in the First World War and later Official Historian. The primacy of Bean in Australian war reportage is irrefutable and his influence was felt by subsequent generations of correspondents who were, to some extent, forced to grapple with his legacy. As the historian Peter Stanley has written, 'Bean not only documented and interpreted Australia's experience of war, he himself constituted a part of the story'.[4] For those Australian correspondents active during the Second World War, particularly those in Australian employment, Bean was the towering figure of the profession and was still very much active at home in the time of their own reporting. Bean certainly emphasised that the search for 'truth' must be the guiding principle of those in the profession. Writing in his diary at Gallipoli, for example, he noted that 'I think the nation *must* have as true an account of the war as military necessity can permit … I do think the people of any modern state worth living in will require some sort of [truthful] information'.[5] The war correspondents considered here certainly

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[1] Description of the oculus available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART96849?image=1>. Accessed 20 Jun 2022.

[2] 'Tribute to war correspondents unveiled at Australian War Memorial in Canberra by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull', ABC: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-23/war-correspondents-memorial-unveiled-in-canberra/6798062>. Accessed 20 Jun 2022.

[3] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004), xi.

[4] Peter Stanley (ed.), *Charles Bean: Man, Myth, Legacy* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2017), 4.

[5] Charles Bean, cited in Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011), 57.

emphasised this hunger for the truth in their own writings, though recognised that within the confines of censorship and amidst the confusion of war, this would only be possible to a certain extent.

In his little-known novel of 1962, *The Far Road*, George Johnston adopts the alter-ego of David Meredith, a correspondent covering the conflict in China during the Second World War. During a moment of reflection over the nature of his profession, Meredith states that he has experienced 'a fleeting glimpse of truth'.[6] In essence, this is at the heart of the war correspondent's work. They are eyewitnesses to events of historic significance, but they cannot see all and do not have access to all the facts. And nor would most of them claim this. And yet, as Kevin Williams has written in his recent history of war reporting, 'The belief in objectivity was hardwired into the profession in the latter part of the 19th century'.[7] This, he argues, represents a 'tension at the heart of war reporting between the principle of objectivity *and* the practice of eyewitnessing'.[8] In other words, being so close to the action, as many war correspondents are, does not necessarily lend itself to objective or 'truthful' reporting. In fact, it can have quite the opposite effect as correspondents are caught up in the emotion and excitement of the events unfolding around them. Moreover, getting to the objective truth of the matter can be hampered for war correspondents by factors like 'Censorship, accreditation, access, patriotic demands and operational security'.[9] The 'fleeting glimpse of truth' which correspondents are exposed to in their line of work is made all the more transient by these often necessary limitations on their work.

These limitations, as Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer have noted, complicate 'what counts as truth in the war zone'.[10] The 'experience of a reporter's being there, so important for distant publics eager for news of the events of a war-torn region', they write, 'is shaped quite systematically by a weave of limitations—political, military, economic, and technological, among others'.[11] This was certainly the case for Australian war correspondents in the Second World War who were, as Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath have written in their overview of Australian conflict reporting, 'the most heavily censored of the Western media'.[12] Though they 'Overwhelmingly … accepted the censorship constraints as part of the system in which they had to operate', there was, as will be discussed in chapter seven, some significant pushback against this.[13] This raises important questions about the relationship between war correspondents and their handlers, whether these be their private employers, the government, or the military. The notion that the media, on the one hand, fight for absolute transparency and truth in times of war, while, on the other hand, the government and military fight to restrict this is, of course, far too simplistic. This has been noted by Paul Moorcraft, who has argued that media-military relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries 'were generally

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[6] George Johnston, *The Far Road* (Melbourne: Fontana Books, 1987 edition), 146.
[7] Kevin Williams, *A New History of War Reporting* (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), 193.
[8] *Ibid.*, 193.
[9] *Ibid.*, 194.
[10] Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (eds.), *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 5.
[11] *Ibid.*, 5.
[12] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 5.
[13] *Ibid.*, 202.

co-operative, not conflicting, especially during wars of national survival'.[14] 'If co-operation is generally the rule', he asks, 'what are the reasons for this, bearing in mind the intrinsic dichotomies of media disclosure and military secrecy?'.[15]

This question has been explored by Susan Carruthers in her book *The Media at War*, in which she argues that 'as institutions, the media have generally served the military rather well … There have long been grounds for optimism about military-media relations, although precisely the reverse has often been feared and proclaimed'.[16] In analysing the work of war correspondents, therefore, it is necessary to tread carefully: they can certainly come into conflict with systems of authority in the pursuit of the 'truth', but they can also be useful and willing collaborators with these same bodies, perhaps out of a sense of patriotism or identification with 'the cause'. As the Second World War was widely regarded as a 'matter of national survival', Kevin Williams' assertion that 'What is thought by many to be more important than telling the truth about war is *winning* it' rings true.[17] It is true, too, that without the cooperation of the military, war correspondents simply would not be able to conduct their work. As such, 'War reporting cannot', as Williams writes elsewhere, 'be disentangled from war propaganda'.[18] Particularly in the Second World War, the work of Australia's correspondents must be understood in the context of the wider propaganda machine, especially when those correspondents were directly employed by governmental and associated bodies.

This is a factor which should not be overlooked in an analysis of the work of war correspondents. Yet, in the popular imagination, there is often what Barbara Korte has called an 'aura of adventure and heroism' surrounding them—an image which is sometimes pushed by the correspondents themselves.[19] This seductive image of the war correspondent as a bold 'adventurer or risk-taker' can contribute to the sense that 'their experiences are [somehow] more authentic, engaged, and noteworthy than those of other kinds of journalists'.[20] As Allan and Zelizer have argued, this supposed authenticity stems from their closeness to the events which they describe. In certain cases, this closeness can emerge from a desire to be a 'player' in events or serve 'the cause'. This personal closeness to events can result in 'the absence of a broader perspective'.[21] When regular journalists, however, are seen to have become too close to their stories and sources or have some kind of emotional attachment to them, they are generally removed from the story.[22] There does, therefore, seem to be a double standard here,

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[14] Paul L. Moorcraft, *Dying for Truth: The Concise History of Frontline War Reporting* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016), xvii.
[15] *Ibid.*, xvii.
[16] Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the 20th Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 271-272.
[17] Kevin Williams, "Something More Important than Truth: Ethical Issues in War Reporting", in *Ethical Issues in Journalism and the Media*, eds. Andrew Belsey and Ruth Chadwick (Oxford: Routledge, 1992), 156.
[18] Williams, *A New History of War Reporting*, 9.
[19] Barbara Korte, "Touched by the Pain of Others: War Correspondents in Contemporary Fiction", *English Studies* 88, no. 2 (2007): 183.
[20] Allan and Zelizer (eds.), *Reporting War*, 4.
[21] *Ibid.*, 4.
[22] *Ibid.*, 4.

with exceptions made for war correspondents in this sense because of the risky and 'heroic' scenarios in which their work is often produced.

These scenarios are centred around the idea that war correspondents are risk-takers who stop at nothing to bear witness to events of historic significance. This has traditionally been an inherently masculine domain. As Janet Harris and Kevin Williams have argued, 'Risk-taking is also seen as a characteristic of machismo. Covering wars is an opportunity to affirm one's manliness. The portrayal of war correspondents in novels, films and popular culture in general regularly focuses on their heroic qualities and endeavours'.[23] As the historian Jeannine Baker has written in her study of Australian women war reporters, 'The enduring image of a war correspondent is adventurous, individualistic, and undeniably masculine … The mythology, and its edge of glamour, was one that male correspondents themselves encouraged and revelled in'.[24] As Baker has pointed out in the Australian example, 'Women journalists were not permitted to be officially accredited as war correspondents or to report from operational areas' until 1942, and there were still limitations for them after this.[25] Writing of the sexism implicit in Evelyn Waugh's memoir of his brief time as a war correspondent in the mid-1930s, meanwhile, Michael Salwen has noted that 'sexism was endemic in journalism during this period, perhaps more so than usual in war reporting'.[26] The popular conception of the war correspondent is, therefore, highly exclusionary, focussing on the excitement of their daring deeds and, as Malcolm Turnbull stated at the unveiling of the oculus, their supposed determination to 'hold up truth to power'.

But war correspondents often have other concerns beyond this supposed determination to speak truth to power. The nature of the work can be, for some, a source of real enjoyment and indeed opportunity. As the historian Jean Hood has written, 'Being a war correspondent … can be addictive; over the decades many have thrived on adrenaline, danger, the thrill of the scoop … and the comradeship that exists not just within a team but among the press corps around them'.[27] The crucible of war offers professional and artistic opportunity for those reporting on it, with the ability to make one's name sometimes being a motivating factor. 'Fame is an important but largely unspoken reason for conflict reporting', Anderson and Trembath have written, 'exposure from covering war propels a select few to celebrity status'.[28] The allure of this potential status can certainly lead to the 'thrill of the scoop': being the first to the story, beating one's peers and rivals, has the potential to fuel the 'competitive element' of the work.[29] And yet, despite this competitive aspect, there has existed in war correspondent networks a real sense of belonging to a particular and distinguished group. In his discussion of British war correspondents of the Victorian era, for instance, Devin Dattan

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[23] Janet Harris and Kevin Williams, *Reporting War and Conflict* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 4.
[24] Jeannine Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters: Boer War to Vietnam* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2015), 3.
[25] *Ibid.*, 54.
[26] Michael B. Salwen, "Evelyn Waugh in Ethiopia: The Novelist as War Correspondent and Journalism Critic", *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 19. See also Evelyn Waugh, *Waugh in Abyssinia* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1936).
[27] Jean Hood, *War Correspondent: Reporting Under Fire Since 1850* (London: Conway, 2011), 6.
[28] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 10.
[29] Harris and Williams, *Reporting War and Conflict*, 30.

has drawn attention to the 'community ethos of the war correspondents', noting that this sense of belonging 'was integral to the journalistic culture' of the group.[30] The journalism scholar Colleen Murrell, meanwhile, has observed that 'foreign correspondents exist as a body of people, who live and breathe a group culture'.[31]

It is clear, therefore, that there are a variety of motivating factors for war correspondents to pursue their line of work, and that there are numerous aspects of their work which warrant careful consideration. The popular impression of war correspondents as 'truth seekers' is overly simplistic and fails to take into account the complications of media-military/governmental relations when it comes to reporting conflict. This is because, and it will be seen at various points in this thesis, correspondents may identify with the goals and motivations of these official bodies. This does not mean, of course, that there are no frustrations for the correspondents to whom this applies to. Complaints regarding issues like censorship and over-regulation have been routine in the profession, while the competition for stories can result in an overly-hostile workplace environment, with correspondents taking ever greater risks to 'get the story'. What is evident is that, in seeking to gain an understanding of these individuals, it is helpful to consider them as a group, partly because they have often viewed themselves as part of a wider war correspondent network. In doing this, we can greater appreciate the range of motivating factors to put oneself in harm's way to report from conflict zones and the different ways in which the job might be done.

Conceptualising and Constructing a Group Biography of Australia's Second World War Correspondents

This thesis has at its heart six key war correspondents: Osmar White, George Johnston, Kenneth Slessor, Chester Wilmot, Damien Parer and George Silk. There are several reasons why these six are the primary individuals of focus. Firstly, they were among the biggest and most accomplished names in their profession in Australia, receiving at various times significant press coverage and plaudits. Their work was widely consumed. Secondly, they span across multiple media formats: print journalism, photography, cinematography and radio broadcasting. Though there is a range of media formats considered here, it will be shown that there were numerous points of identification between the correspondents. Thirdly, there was at various times close cooperation or rivalry between these men, providing useful case studies for discussions concerning aspects of their work such as competition, the challenge to official authority, and the wider war correspondent community.

[30] Devin Dattan, "The Journalistic Culture and Self-Image of Victorian War Correspondents", in *Reporting from the Wars 1850-2015: The Origins and Evolution of the War Correspondent*, eds. Barry Turner et al. (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019), 36.
[31] Colleen Murrell, *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The Role of Fixers* (NY: Routledge, 2015), 34.

Fourthly, I have been influenced by Lytton Strachey's approach to the construction of his seminal group biography *Eminent Victorians*. His 'choice of subjects', he notes, 'has been determined by no desire to construct a system or to prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and of art'.[32] The matter of convenience is highly significant. There is a rich range of sources available for these six correspondents. While some correspondents left very little in the way of a paper trail, there is ample material available for the six I have chosen. Chester Wilmot's personal papers in the National Library of Australia, for example, span fifty-five boxes, while Kenneth Slessor's span twenty-two.

Finally, there was an artistic element to their lives and work, spanning the fields of poetry, novel and short story writing, filmmaking, photography, historical writing and travelogues. This creative element in their lives greatly influenced their work as war correspondents. All thought of war as the theatre in which their artistic abilities might be put to the test and thrive—the pinnacle of their artistic achievements, some of them believed, would be made possible by their reporting of the war. The war was, therefore, a creative and professional opportunity for them. Certainly, as Clement Semmler has written, the Second World War 'saw the aggregation of a galaxy of what one might call literary journalists—Australian newspapermen who achieved international fame as war reporters and, after the war, further enhanced their reputations as writers'.[33] But beyond just writing, these correspondents also excelled in the other fields mentioned. This, I believe, represents a crucial difference between them and their most notable predecessor, Bean. Bean's influence over the profession in Australia was, as will be seen numerous times over the course of this thesis, profound, but he was not an 'artist'. Though Bean's crowning literary achievement—his *Official History* of Australia in the First World War—had arguably, as Robin Gerster has written, 'both the intimacy of a military memoir and the dynamism of a good war novel', it has always been 'more a resource for researchers than for readers'.[34] The general impression of the *Official History* is what Denis Winter called its 'severe' style: 'Factual, restrained and sparing in the use of adjectives … excessive details sometimes clutters the text and obscures the flow of the narrative'.[35] This, perhaps, partly accounts for why none of Bean's volumes of the work sold more than 22,000 copies from the time of its publication up to the mid-1970s.[36] Bean's wartime despatches, too, were, as Anderson and Trembath have written, 'often less than compelling'—he was, they state, 'not always an effective journalist'.[37] Despite this, as will be explained in the main body of this thesis, Bean, to a very significant extent, laid the blueprint for contemporary Australian war reporting in the mid-twentieth century.

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[32] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986 edition), 9.
[33] Clement Semmler, "War Correspondents in Australian Literature: An Outline", *Australian Literary Studies* 12, no. 2 (1985): 197.
[34] Robin Gerster, "On Re-Reading Bean's Official History", *Meanjin* 76, no. 3 (2017): 167-168.
[35] Denis Winter, *Making the Legend: The War Writings of C.E.W. Bean* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1992), 15.
[36] David Walker, "The Getting of Manhood", in *Australian Popular Culture*, eds. Peter Spearritt and David Walker (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 143.
[37] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 2.

The six individuals of primary focus here, therefore, possessed an artistic and creative sensibility which far outweighed Bean's and which was put to the test across multiple media platforms. In studying them, it has been necessary to impose certain restraints on the thesis. I have only chosen individuals who were directly employed by Australian organisations, largely confining my discussion of their work in the field to their time spent covering Australian troops and events. I might easily have included, for instance, Alan Moorehead, the Australian war correspondent for the British *Daily Express* newspaper. Moorehead has been described by one of his biographers as 'one of the most successful writers in English of his day … the acclaimed author of a series of outstanding works on the campaigns of World War 2, the biographer of Montgomery and Churchill, a prolific international journalist, a historical writer, novelist, and a major travel writer of his time, [he] was a household name in Britain and widely admired in the United States'.[38] But herein lies the reason why Moorehead is not a central figure in this thesis (though he will feature at various points in the prose): he was employed by a British paper and did not report on Australians as a matter of priority, remaining in North Africa and Europe for the entirety of the war.

All of the correspondents I have chosen, in contrast, reported on Australian affairs for Australian organisations. While in Australian employment, all six individuals reported from New Guinea, with four of them also having reported from the Middle East prior to the outbreak of war in the Pacific. During this time, they often came into contact with one another, working at various times in close proximity or, occasionally, as a team. It is this period of their careers which I am particularly concerned with here as it provides the most fertile ground for a comparative biographical study. Though most of them went on to report for other international media or in other theatres of war, this is largely beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I take a targeted look at this group in order to explain the historical significance of their lives and work in the Australian context, addressing questions concerning such issues as their journalistic approach and ambitions, how these manifested themselves 'in the field', their attitudes towards and relations with sources of official authority, and how they helped to shape the popular imagination of the country's role in the Second World War. As the historian Prue Torney-Parlicki has written, war correspondents have 'helped to shape perceptions of national identity' in Australia, and it was certainly no different for those operating in the Second World War.[39] In order to understand these correspondents and grapple with the questions I have just raised, it is necessary to analyse the context, culture and tradition from which they emerged, as well as how they themselves influenced the culture of their time.

These guiding questions will, I believe, supplement our knowledge of how these correspondents worked in the field, bringing with them their ideas about how they wanted to conduct this work and what they sought to achieve through it. As such, the thesis is structured

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[38] Ann Moyal, *Alan Moorehead: A Rediscovery* (Canberra: NLA, 2005), xi. Moorehead has also been an extensive subject of biography. See Tom Pocock, *Alan Moorehead* (London: Bodley Head, 1990) and Thornton McCamish, *Our Man Elsewhere: In Search of Alan Moorehead* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2016).

[39] Prue Torney-Parlicki, "War Reporters and Reporting", in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, eds. Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Oxford University press, 2001 revised edition), 675.

in two parts. Part One, 'Origins', consists of five chapters largely concerning the pre-war life of the correspondents. It considers their artistic and intellectual backgrounds and how these shaped their journalistic work, as well as their initial appointments as war correspondents. What did they seek to achieve through their work in this role? What was expected of them?

Part Two, 'Reporting the War', moves to a more thematic discussion of their work as war correspondents. It consists of three larger chapters. Chapter six, 'In the Field: 'A Vast National Work'?', is an analysis of their work in war zones and its impact. It explores the expectations of them while they reported from the battlefield, how they sought to operate in the field, and considers some case studies of their work as part of a wider team. Chapter seven, ''Control' and 'Facilitation': Responses to Official Authority', examines the nature of the restrictions imposed on Australian war correspondents by military and governmental bodies from the Middle East to New Guinea, focussing on the correspondents' responses to these. Chapter eight, 'The Anzac Legend', analyses the correspondents' engagement with the Anzac Legend and their role in embellishing the mythology established by those like Bean in the First World War.

By structuring the thesis in this way, my fundamental concerns are to attempt to understand who these individuals were, how they conceived of journalism and their wartime work, what they sought to achieve through this, the relation of the individual to the wider correspondent group/network, and their overall historical and cultural significance in Australia. While I do emphasise the importance of the group nature of the war correspondents at various points during their time in the profession, it is important to remember that each of them retained individuality. War correspondents shared, as Paul Moorcraft has written, common experiences in conflict that 'the rest of humanity usually observes only from a distance', but they all had their own unique approaches and perspectives.[40] In this attempt to capture a sense of both the individual and the group, I have employed group biography, a subset of 'collective biography', to help tell the story. Though there are a number of 'cradle to grave' biographies already written about several of the war correspondents considered here, it is my contention that a 'side by side' analysis of them will help to illuminate certain key themes and ideas through which we can better understand their work, targeting their lives in journalism and war reportage more specifically.[41]

Group biography has been characterised by Barbara Caine as, for the most part, focusing on 'people who are closely connected to each other through marriage, blood ties, friendship or

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[40] Moorcraft, *Dying for Truth*, xiii.

[41] Biographies have been written about George Johnston, Kenneth Slessor, Chester Wilmot and Damien Parer. See Garry Kinnane, *George Johnston: A Biography* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986); Geoffrey Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography* (Melbourne: Viking, 1991); Neil McDonald, *Valiant for Truth: The Life of Chester Wilmot, War Correspondent* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2016); Neil McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2012), first published as *War Cameraman: The Story of Damien Parer* (Melbourne: Lothian Books, 1994); Niall Brennan, *Damien Parer: Cameraman* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994); Frank Legg, *The Eyes of Damien Parer* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1963). Brief portraits of George Johnston, Kenneth Slessor and Chester Wilmot are also included in Peter Sekuless, *A Handful of Hacks* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999).

involvement in a particular set of activities or ideas' in order to 'delineate the nature of this connection and to explore the relationships or the shared ideas and activities of the group'.[42] The group nature of the work of war correspondents, being a particularly intense and unique subset of journalism, warrants consideration. As the anthropologist Mark Pedelty has written in his study of war correspondents in El Salvador in the late 1980s and early 1990s, 'reporters are a community in and of themselves. They work together, play together, and often, live together. They share an integrated set of myths, rituals, and behavioural norms. They are, in short, a culture'.[43] This was certainly true of Australian war correspondents in the Second World War, who were part of a relatively well-defined professional and social network which had cultural, political, and intellectual significance. For this significance to be assessed we need a detailed knowledge of the network. A biographical approach can serve as an effective foundation for this. The 'careers of prominent individuals', as the historian Judith Brown has written, are ' a valuable source for the historian—not in the biographer's sense of "what did my subject achieve in his lifetime?" but more deeply, as a window into the networks and systems in which those individuals worked'.[44] By analysing the war correspondent network through the lens of group biography, we can see with greater clarity how the individuals and the context illuminate each other—Australian war correspondents both shaped and were shaped by the world they inhabited.

I am, of course, aware of the potential pitfalls of a biographical approach, which have been summarised by Ian Kershaw. Biography risks, he writes, 'over-personalizing complex historical developments, over-emphasizing the role of the individual in shaping and determining events, [and] ignoring or playing down the social and political context in which those actions took place'.[45] The biographer, in other words, must be careful not to exaggerate the importance of their subject or subjects, isolate them from their historical context, or indeed over-promise what they can realistically deliver. By this I mean the fallacy that an individual's life can somehow be told in full, with absolute accuracy, and with unlimited access to what Virginia Woolf called 'the rainbow-like intangibility' of 'that inner life of thought and emotion'.[46]

Woolf's warning regarding the supposed impenetrability of the 'inner life' seems on the surface to be concerning. But does the impossibility of gaining absolute and unlimited access to the inner life really present a significant problem to the biographer? Criticising Woolf's views on biography, the philosopher Ray Monk argues that very little of the unrecorded inner life 'is *intrinsically* or *essentially* hidden from the historical record … the area of inner life that *could not possibly* be recorded is much smaller than is often thought'.[47] While the

[42] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 47.
[43] Mark Pedelty, *War Stories: The Culture of Foreign Correspondents* (NY: Routledge, 1995), 4.
[44] Judith M. Brown, '"Life Histories' and the History of Modern South Asia", *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009), 590.
[45] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936* (London: W. W. Norton, 1998), xxi.
[46] Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography", in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 150-155.
[47] Ray Monk, "This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality, and Character", *Philosophy and Literature* 31, no. 1 (2007): 24.

biographer cannot exactly recreate the life, they can still gain a very reasonable degree of access to the inner life and personality of their subject through the subjective interpretation of facts, which are accessible via standard historical sources. In the case of the war correspondents considered here, these sources are primarily letters, diaries, notebooks, reports, and other personal papers.

In drawing on these sources, I hope to add to the scholarship concerning Australian war correspondents, the foremost work on this subject being Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath's *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (2011). *Witnesses to War* provides an overview of the profession in Australia from the colonial conflicts of the late nineteenth-century to the modern wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drawing largely on the personal experiences of various correspondents to shape its narrative. The justification for the book was made by Anderson in 2010, who wrote that 'Although the international literature on war and the media, its genres and the culture of war correspondents is considerable, an Australian perspective is lacking. Despite the immense interest, there is an absence of a critical, collective work on Australian war reporting'.[48] This was a point which had been made a decade prior to Anderson's assertion, with Prue Torney-Parlicki writing that 'Studies of Australian war reporting have been fragmentary and of varied literary quality'.[49] This has certainly been the case, with numerous works which do consider them often being hagiographical or unscholarly in their approach. The historian Neil McDonald, for instance, has written an extensive amount on Damien Parer, Chester Wilmot and George Silk, and his work has certainly been a major contribution to our understanding of these individuals, however it often takes an overly simplistic approach to its subjects. His work sometimes reads more like an adventure novel than a scholarly analysis, with the correspondents (usually referred to by their first name) appearing as the heroes of the story, triumphing against the odds.[50] The same is true, too, of books by Peter Sekuless and Pat Burgess.[51] As Anderson has written of these books, they 'fail to document at length some of the more troubling issues of war coverage such as censorship, propaganda, the issue of race and the compliance of some journalists on the frontline'.[52] Tony Hill's *Voices from the Air: ABC War Correspondents of the Second World War* (2016), meanwhile, is a useful specialized study of those who worked in the field for the ABC during the Second World War—a rare example of a text which focuses on Australian war correspondents in the conflict concerned.[53]

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[48] Fay Anderson, "Good Campers: The History of Australian War Reporting", *History Compass* 8, no. 10 (2010): 1167.
[49] Torney-Parlicki, "War Reporters and Reporting", 676.
[50] See, for example, McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*; *Valiant for Truth*; *Chester Wilmot Reports: Broadcasts that Shaped World War II* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2004); "Reporting the Papuan Campaign", *Quadrant* 46, no. 11 (2002): 67-74; "Getting it Right: Damien Parer, Osmar White and Chester Wilmot on the Kokoda Track", *The Sydney Papers* 14, no. 2 (2002), 96-109; "George Silk (1916-2004)", *Quadrant* 48, no. 12 (2004), 58-61; Neil McDonald and Peter Brune, *200 Shots: Damien Parer and George Silk with the Australians at War in New Guinea* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014).
[51] Sekuless, *A Handful of Hacks*; Pat Burgess, *Warcos* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1986).
[52] Anderson, "Good Campers", 1167.
[53] Tony Hill, *Voices from the Air: ABC War Correspondents of the Second World War* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2016).

Edited collections of writings by Australian war correspondents, meanwhile, have been the source of some recent attention. Robin Gerster and Peter Pierce's *On the War-Path: An Anthology of Australian Military Travel* assembles a broad cross section of their writing on the theme of travel, arguing that 'It is a truism of Australian history that the fighting of foreign wars has been crucial to the development of national identity'.[54] In conveying their impressions of far-flung places through the prism of their war writing, Australian correspondents have given Australians a greater sense of the outside world and their country's interaction with it. Garrie Hutchinson's *Eyewitnesses: Australians Write from the Front-Line*, meanwhile, similarly assembles a collection of war reportage by a wide range of Australian war correspondents.[55] These collections do not, of course, contain extensive analysis of their subjects.

As previously mentioned, Jeannine Baker has written extensively on the experiences of Australian women war reporters, helping to remind us that war reporting was not solely a man's domain. 'Historians of Australian war journalism have', she writes, 'paid little attention to the role played by Australian women journalists in covering the war. Women's reporting is seen as marginal to the more important military story since it was primarily confined to the home front'.[56] In constructing this thesis, I have had to think carefully about my all-male choice of subjects. It is irrefutable that the six correspondents chosen were closely linked and provide a useful foundation for a group biography. In writing their stories, I recognise that they inhabited a male-dominated world in which the characteristics of 'machismo' and male risk taking were often celebrated. Indeed, the predominant character traits in some correspondents, such as an inflated ego or the desire to put themselves in harm's way, stemmed partly from the bristling masculine bravado of an inherently competitive profession.

In sum, this thesis seeks to supplement the existing scholarship on Australian war correspondents. Its originality lies in its comparative biographical and historical analysis of some of the key individuals of the Second World War. In doing this, it builds on the work of *Witnesses to War*, which is a very useful overview of the history of the profession in Australia. By narrowing my choice of subjects down to six individuals, I do not attempt to draw conclusions or make judgements about the profession as a whole at that time. Rather, I seek to understand these individuals, their work in the field, and why that work mattered. As such, it seeks to contribute a genuine scholarly analysis of some of those who helped to develop and shape the profession in Australia after the foundation laid by Bean.

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[54] Robin Gerster and Peter Pierce (eds.), *On the War-Path: An Anthology of Australian Military Travel* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 6.
[55] Garrie Hutchinson (ed.), *Eyewitnesses: Australians Write from the Front-Line* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2005).
[56] Jeannine Baker, "Marginal Creatures: Australian Women War Reporters During World War II", *History Compass* 13, no. 2 (2015): 40. See also, Jeannine Baker, "Lines of Demarcation: Australian Women War Reporters in Europe During World War II", *History Australia* 12, no. 1 (2015): 187-206.

Part One

Origins

The British biographer Nigel Hamilton has pointed to an unusual source to help us conceive of the writing and reading of biography. Discussing the classic Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane*, he cites the character of Mr. Rawlston, who delivers the line that 'it isn't enough to show what a man did—you've got to tell us who he was'.[57] This first half of the thesis will, so far as it is possible, attempt to do just that. In order to understand the war work of the six journalists of key interest here, one cannot simply dive into the years following 1939, pointing to interesting episodes in their lives and work and why this was significant. Rather, the years prior to the war are crucial to understanding who these men were and why their work mattered. These years provide us with the threads that will be developed in the second part of the thesis, providing insight into how these men conceived of things like journalism, art, the opportunity that war presented them, and Australia.

The biographer must, according to Leon Edel, 'learn to understand man's ways of dreaming, thinking and using his fancy'. By adopting an analytical approach to this, we might 'see through the rationalizations, the postures, the self-delusions and self-deceptions of our subjects'. After all, according to Edel, the 'very choice of a given walk of life [by the individual] is in itself revelatory'.[58] This has been a most useful method of thinking in the construction of this part of the thesis. One attribute is common to all six war correspondents discussed here: ambition. Ambition, to a significant extent, drove their ways of thinking. This is not necessarily a negative attribute. Aside from what might be called selfish ambitions like a narrow focus on career progression, personal fame and an ultra-competitive desire to 'get the story' before one's peers, we might also point towards such ambitions as the desire to create socially relevant and meaningful art, the production of quality and accurate journalism, or the aspiration to serve one's country to the best of one's ability. I believe that all these qualities are touched on to varying extents over the next five chapters as I analyse the intellectual, social and artistic origins of these war correspondents.

Of course, it is necessary in this section not to simply talk solely about the individual concerned. By this I mean that I have taken into consideration the relevant wider context in which these individuals were operating prior to the war. 'Historians are not interested', David Nasaw has written, 'in simply charting the course of individual lives, but in examining those lives in dialectical relationship to the multiple social, political, and cultural worlds they inhabit and give meaning to'.[59] My discussion of Chester Wilmot's early years, for example, takes into account developments in radio technology and the ideas of William Macmahon Ball, my discussion of Damien Parer looks at the growth of the film and photographic

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[57] Nigel Hamilton, *How to do Biography: A Primer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 120.
[58] Leon Edel, "Biography and the Science of Man", *New Directions in Biography*, ed. Anthony M. Friedson (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1981), 8-9.
[59] David Nasaw, introduction to "AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography", *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 574.

industry in Australia, while the chapter on George Johnston touches on life in Melbourne during the Depression. These backdrops help to explain who these individuals were, how they came to view the world, and what they sought to achieve through their work. The following chapters establish a number of themes and ideas that will be developed thematically in the second part of the thesis. Each chapter in this section is preceded by an introductory overview of the war correspondent in question, briefly highlighting some of the key moments in their careers and themes that will be discussed in more depth later.

Chapter One

Osmar White

Osmar White was born in 1909 in the town of Feilding on the North Island of New Zealand. As a young boy he and his parents moved to Townsville before finally settling in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains, where he became a valued member of the local literary and artistic scene headed by Eric and Eleanor Dark. Having written hundreds of short stories, White determined on a career in journalism, working for a number of papers before joining Keith Murdoch's Melbourne-based *Herald and Weekly Times* in 1938. Quality journalism was, for him, a literary artform which approached news stories from a moral angle. 'I think one of the highest literary functions is to be a really good reporter', he said after the war, 'and I've always tried to be a really good reporter'. He sought to pursue, he continued, 'the art of reporting'.[60]

Having been appointed a war correspondent by the *Herald* in late 1941, White became Australia's second accredited correspondent after the *Argus*'s George Johnston. White and Johnston travelled to New Guinea together in early 1942, though they were unhappy colleagues, with White condemning Johnston's 'lack of physical guts' and labelling him 'uncongenial company'.[61] His biggest gripe with Johnston, however, was that he simply 'didn't respect him as a war correspondent' because 'he never tried to beat the propaganda'.[62] This desire to report accurately and retain his journalistic integrity were important principles for White. He actively sought to challenge restrictions and 'over-censorship' in the field during his war service, describing General MacArthur's staff as mere 'propagandists'.[63] He was, however, not above the often intense competition for news stories which occurs in conflict zones.

Covering the war in New Guinea, White also worked closely alongside fellow war correspondents Chester Wilmot and Damien Parer on the Bulldog Track, before later covering the Kokoda Track. His magnum opus, *Green Armour*, was written about his experiences in New Guinea. After following the Australian troops there, he then reported on the American forces in the Pacific from early 1943 and then in Europe from 1944. He was later present at the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945 and was the only Australian journalist present at the Nazi surrender in Reims one month later. After the war he continued to work in journalism and published widely on the history and culture of New Guinea. So diverse were his interests that he even published a guide and directory of Australian wine in 1972. He died in Melbourne in 1991.

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[60] Osmar White interview with Binny Lum, 1967, title number: 1108374, NFSA.
[61] Osmar White letter to Mollie White, 4 Mar 1942, Osmar White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[62] Osmar White interview with Peter Jepperson, 14 Oct 1990, S00981, AWM.
[63] *Ibid*.

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When the Blue Mountaineers was formed in Katoomba in 1929, they dubiously claimed to be 'the only organised climbing club in Australia'.[64] Though beaten to this title by Bert Salmon's southeast Queensland-based group, 'The Crowd', by three years, the Mountaineers were undoubtedly the first of their kind in New South Wales.[65] Dubbed the 'Katoomba Suicide Club', its members refused to use a rope as a direct aid as they scaled some of the toughest heights in the Blue Mountains.[66] Katoomba at that time was a cultural and artistic centre, and the early members of the Blue Mountaineers reflected the town's eclectic mix of characters.

The group's founder, Dr Eric Dark, was a prominent medical practitioner and socialist campaigner who, while serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps, had been awarded the Military Cross on the Western Front. His wife, Eleanor, was also a key member of the group and soon became a famous novelist, her second and third novels both winning the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Frank Walford helped Dark with the establishment of the club: a crocodile and buffalo hunter in his youth, Walford later worked in journalism and published two books of poetry, 500 short stories and fourteen novels.[67] Dot Butler, later a notable conservationist, was also a member. One of the youngest members of the Blue Mountaineers was Osmar White.

Figure 1: Osmar White (in beret) with members of the Blue Mountaineers, c. 1929 (Blue Mountains City Library)

White's father, Hubert, had all but disappeared by the time of the group's founding. A musician and piano tuner, Hubert was born in England and had travelled to South America in his younger days with White's New Zealander mother, Mary Grace, though had returned from the voyage a different man. Supposedly he had fallen down a ship's companionway and was never the same again, later developing an addiction to cough mixture and alcohol. He

[64] *Sun* (Sydney), 16 Oct 1932, 19.
[65] Michael Meadows, "Reinventing the Heights: The Origins of Rockclimbing Culture in Australia", *Continuum: Journal of Medial & Cultural Studies* 27, no. 3 (2013): 335.
[66] *Ibid*., 336-8.
[67] Judith Clark, *Eleanor Dark: A Writer's Life* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1998), 74.

relocated to Queensland by the end of the decade, living a somewhat nomadic and controversial existence between various towns: he was, for example, convicted of 'an act of indecency' in Mount Morgan while still 'a new arrival in the town'.[68] In Hubert's absence, Eric Dark served as a father figure for White, who had excelled in school and was developing a keen interest in writing, politics, and the natural world. In 1922 he had finished class dux at Katoomba High School, coming first in the related subjects of English, History, Botany, Geography and Geology.[69]

Through Eric and Eleanor, White entered a social network that valued intellectual, artistic and physical activity. This network of individuals found their spiritual and social home at the Dark household, Varuna, where Eric and Eleanor established a writers' group. If Katoomba was a cultural and artistic centre at this time, Varuna was its epicentre, becoming what Judith Clark called 'another node in a kind of progressive literary intellectual network based in Melbourne and Sydney', a place where the Darks could 'grow into their ideas and beliefs … [and] find a little company who shared their sense of social justice, intellectual rigour, and belief in the values transmitted by a written culture'.[70] Numerous other artistic pursuits interested the Darks and their social circle—the Leura Dramatic Players, for example, was another creative outlet which both Eleanor and White were members of.[71]

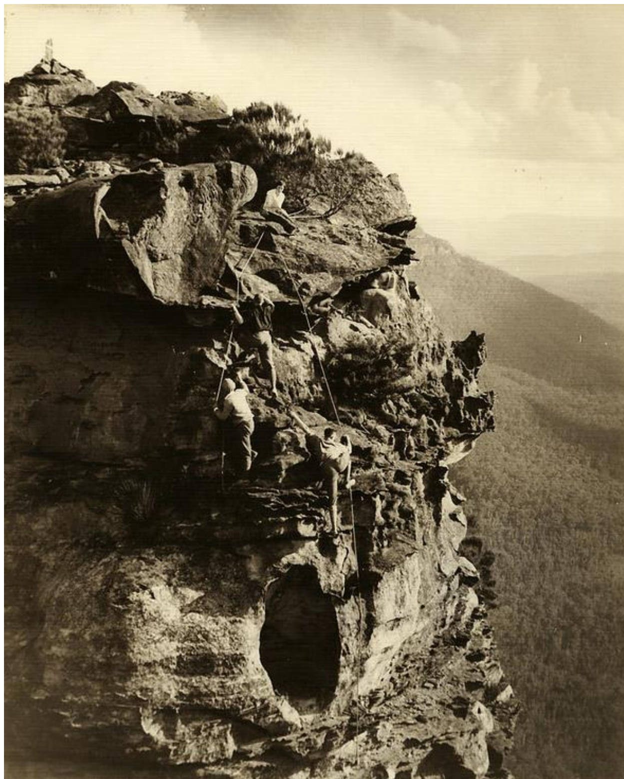

Figure 2: Osmar White (in beret) with Eleanor and Eric Dark (dark shirt) and Eric Lowe, climbing on Boar's Head Rock, Katoomba, 1931 (Blue Mountains City Library)

[68] *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 11 Sept 1946, 4.
[69] *The Blue Mountain Echo*, 8 Dec 1922, 6.
[70] Clark, *Eleanor Dark*, 66.
[71] Marivic Wyndham, *'A World-Proof Life': Eleanor Dark, a Writer in her Times* (Sydney: UTSePress, 2007), 60.

The Darks' influence on White was profound. He later recalled that though getting established as a writer 'was a pretty tough life', the Darks 'both gave the impression of believing that writing … was one of the most honourable professions'.[72] This creative spirit at the heart of the group shaped White's world in the absence of his father, encouraging him to put pen to paper and present his writing to the finest literary minds in the Blue Mountains. Eric Lowe, another writer who was a member of both the writers' group and the Blue Mountaineers, summarised the group dynamic, recalling that:

> There were grand times in that interlude between the two wars; days spent in the open, walking, climbing, camping; evenings before the Varuna fire, when we listened to music, discussed everything under the sun, showed each other manuscripts—and tore them to pieces—and cursed heartless publishers![73]

White had first met Eric Dark when he was just fourteen and, as the group's youngest member, was greatly shaped by the Varuna crowd.[74] The group's values formed the basis of White's ideas about writing and journalism. In his lecture notes for a speech about the writing process given after the war, White noted that he became a professional writer:

> not because [I] thought [the] life of [a] writer was better, more satisfactory, more useful than any other life—or, for that matter, because I was under illusion that it was better paid. [I] became [a] writer simply because I believed that practically any other form of occupation would have bored me sooner or later, because [I] possessed no real confidence that I could do anything as well as I could write.[75]

Good writing was, he believed, 'socially significant, whatever the source', while language was 'a vehicle to convey thought, [and] perception'.[76] The long hours spent beside the fire at Varuna had filled him with the belief that 'a good writer … has a sense of moral mission' and that this should be conveyed in language striving to achieve what he called 'my ideal of simplicity, accuracy and clarity'.[77]

This sense of the value of writing and the way in which it should be approached was no doubt instilled in him by Eric and Eleanor Dark, both of whom were committed socialists. Eric explained towards the end of his life that the experience of the Depression in Australia had converted him from 'a perfectly good tory' to 'a democratic socialist': the country was, he believed, 'losing the benefit of its brilliant intellect because of a rotten economic system that condemns [talented young people] to penury'.[78] In White he saw a fine young mind that needed and deserved nurturing.

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[72] Clark, *Eleanor Dark* 77.
[73] *Ibid.*, 77.
[74] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 40, NLA.
[75] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 38, NLA.
[76] *Ibid.*
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 40, NLA.

Under Eric's tutelage, White began to write and publish short stories in the late 1920s for various local publications which were largely 'mystery-thrillers' built around his love of mountaineering and rock climbing.[79] These stories, like much of his later wartime journalism, often conveyed a deep sense of place and a love for the natural world. Adventurers traversed mountains, rivers, jungles and deserts in settings ranging from Australia to the Swiss Alps to the rainforests of New Guinea, a part of the world that White began to take a keen interest in after his first trip there in the early 1930s. Indeed, his most famous book, *Green Armour* (1945), which recounted his experiences of the war in New Guinea, begins with a highly detailed and evocative account of the island's geography and natural beauty. 'When human history was beginning', he wrote in the foreword, 'New Guinea and the islands surrounding it were already a barrier between two worlds. To the north and west were the animals and plants of Asia, and to the south and east were the animals and plants of Australia. There was little interpenetration'.[80] New Guinea's 'mountains and jungles and rivers', he continued, 'are the green armour guarding the empty south'.[81] His description of the main island reveals his reverence for the natural landscape:

> Shaped like a rearing dragon and lying just under the equator, [it] has a spine of mountains 1,000 miles long. At the western end, snowcapped peaks rise to more than 16,000 feet. At the eastern end, the tallest soar between 13,000 and 14,000 feet, and are clothed almost to their summits in dense rain forests. From this mighty backbone of ranges, row upon row of razorbacks extend like herringbone, with roaring torrents in every canyon between them and everlasting rainclouds on every crest.[82]

When White traversed the island's Bulldog Track along with Damien Parer and Chester Wilmot in June 1942, he likely felt as if he were a hero in one of his own stories. In his diary at the time he noted that though war may damage the valleys and canyons around the Track, 'Until all forests end, it [the forest] will still grow and decay, and the white river groan under the spilled loads of heaven'.[83] White's appreciation of the immensity of nature and his determination to convey the feel and emotion of place through simple language was a guiding principle of his writing throughout his life. Literature, he told an audience during a lecture after the war, was at its best when it appealed to 'moral, aesthetic, [and] spiritual convictions'.[84]

With his love of writing and many varied interests, journalism seemed a natural progression for White. It offered the chance to convey these convictions to a wide audience across a broad palette of stories that were, of course, continually developing and changing. It was the excitement of this daily urgency to write the story that appealed to him: 'No assignment', he told cadets at the *Herald-Sun* after the war, 'is so routine that it cannot produce front page news for the really alert man'.[85] The profession also offered him the chance to write with a

[79] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 38, NLA. For examples of White's short stories, see White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 4, folder 23, NLA.
[80] Osmar White, *Green Armour* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1992 edition), 9.
[81] *Ibid.*, 10.
[82] *Ibid.*, 10.
[83] *Ibid.*, 133.
[84] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 38, NLA.
[85] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 39, NLA.

social conscience, the importance of which had been instilled in him by Eric Dark. Dark's socialist politics had rubbed off on White, both of whom were regulars at Katoomba's Current Affairs Library. The library was founded in 1943 by left-wing activist John Apthorp with help from Dark and became a popular meeting place for those with similar political tendencies.[86]

Progressive politics and activism were guiding principles for White from his first steps into journalism. In one of his first jobs in the profession as a reporter for the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* in the late 1920s (which he came to after swiftly dropping out of a degree at the University of Sydney), he had already become a union representative. In the absence of Hubert, White later recalled that 'the family was in the depths of the depression', meaning that 'when I started the university work I had to earn something or other to keep going'.[87] Perhaps naïvely, he believed that journalism, while appealing to his natural literary interests, also offered a way to earn a semi-reliable income. The economic struggles that many families faced at that time were not lost on White, and his journalism offered him an opportunity to, in a small way, communicate with 'regular' people in a direct and unpretentious way. Writing with a social conscience meant that he felt a number of obligations to his readers, not least of which was the duty to communicate factual information in a succinct and straightforward manner. 'In an age of blatant propaganda', he noted in a lecture after the war entitled 'First Steps for the Cadet', 'the moral responsibilities of [journalists] are greater than they have ever been'.[88] In notably prescient fashion, White continued that one of the most important responsibilities for the journalist was to prize and protect 'the asset of public confidence in the reliability of newspapers' above all else.[89] This great concern for 'the truth' was at the centre of White's journalistic philosophy—the desire to discover and report 'truth' were the touchstones of the morally responsible journalist:

> I believe very sincerely that the truth can be presented just as entertainingly and arrestingly as what is not true—that people who twist or angle news "to get it into the paper" are just as incompetent as they are immoral … Nine tenths of the art of successful newspaper writing is in the logical and effective marshalling of pertinent facts.[90]

The craft and moral duties of the journalist led White to accept a position teaching and mentoring journalist cadets of the *Herald-Sun*, his employer during his period as a war correspondent, from 1947 until 1949. White applied himself meticulously to this role, preparing lectures and course outlines, as well as keeping detailed notes about the strengths and weaknesses of each individual cadet under his tutelage (often in the bluntest of terms) and drafting plans for a textbook which he intended to be standard issue for all trainee

[86] John Low, "The Salt of the Earth: A Series on Blue Mountain Labour Identities (No 2) – John Apthorp", *The Hummer* (Australian Society for the Study of Labour History) 1, no. 15 (1987): 10-15.
[87] White interview, S00981, AWM.
[88] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 39, NLA.
[89] *Ibid*.
[90] *Ibid*.

journalists.[91] Time and again in his lectures White returned to the question of journalistic integrity. The journalist's 'accuracy, judgement, integrity and foresight are not without significance', he wrote in a summary of his lectures of 1947-48, 'His responsibility to be truthful, impartial and quick doing his job is probably much greater than most men's'.[92] White's exacting standards no doubt contributed to his oftentimes harsh criticism of cadets who failed to live up to them: 'In spite of continual emphasis on the necessity for accuracy in reporting', he wrote to his superiors at the *Herald*, 'I find that only a minority of cadets can be relied on to take an accurate note of any statement which is at all complicated by terms they do not fully understand. Frankly I do not know how this difficulty is going to be overcome'.[93]

These concerns for absolute integrity—to report, as far as possible, an objective 'truth'—no doubt weighed heavy on White's mind when he was appointed a war correspondent by the *Herald and Weekly Times* in late 1941, having worked for the paper since 1938. The necessity of censorship and the general confines of war reporting were difficult to square with such lofty journalistic ideals. 'The propagandist and the free journalist of course, are natural enemies' he later recalled, noting that 'you had to be a bit of a schizophrenic to deal with the situation'.[94] The complexity of the war correspondent's role as both a factual reporter of news relating to issues of great national importance and as a cog in a larger political and military framework with concerns of its own complicated White's journalistic philosophy. He soon recognised that there was a marked contrast between the roles of a journalist and a war correspondent. This caused him some angst, but he also acknowledged the necessity of adaptation, noting that 'it really was an extremely difficult life to realise that you could not tell what you thought people should know, because of the strategic information … You couldn't tell it like it was for the simple reason the enemy would have had great advantage. So you had to accept the necessity for censorship in a military sense'.[95] This is a fundamental concern that all war correspondents have to deal with, but for White the struggle was intensified by his strong moral convictions about writing and journalism more specifically, beliefs which had been instilled in him from a young age by the Varuna group.

[91] See White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 39, NLA.
[92] *Ibid*.
[93] *Ibid*.
[94] White interview, S00981, AWM.
[95] *Ibid*.

Chapter Two
George Johnston

On being offered a job to cover the war in Korea in 1950, George Johnston later said that 'All I remembered of the [Second World] War was an incredible number of dead human beings and a vast amount of misery. All for what? The answer was certainly not going to be found by running around with a green flash on my shoulder filing urgent press collect'.[96] Johnston had distinguished himself as a correspondent during the Second World War, covering action in New Guinea, India, China and Burma, as well as reporting from Britain, the United States and Japan. Working for the Melbourne-based newspaper the *Argus*, Johnston was the first accredited Australian war correspondent in the conflict and earned himself celebrity status in the Australian newspaper world, of which he was a fixture from the mid-1930s until the mid-1950s.

For all the success that the war brought him in journalism, however, Johnston eventually looked back on his role as a war correspondent with a deep sense of regret. Later he was a prominent pacifist.[97] This regret that Johnston later felt about his role in the war was eventually explored through his real area of interest: the novel. Even prior to the war, novel writing had been Johnston's principal ambition, and establishing himself in the newspaper world seemed to him to be a way to get into it while remaining financially stable. To explore this, however, the problem for the biographer is, as Garry Kinnane (the author of the only full-length biography of Johnston) has written, that 'Solid personal material on Johnston is hard to find' due to the loss or destruction of his personal letters and notebooks after his death in 1970.[98] As such, there is a significant dependence on Johnston's 'public life and its records, and on the recollections of family and friends and neighbours' to uncover details about his life and ways of thinking.[99] The other major source in the exploration of his journalistic life and his perception of it is through what have often been referred to as Johnston's 'semi-autobiographical' novels, featuring his alter-ego David Meredith.

Meredith first features in *Closer to the Sun* (1960) and *The Far Road* (1962), however the character is far more famous for being the narrator of Johnston's much celebrated trilogy of novels: *My Brother Jack* (1964), *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969) and *A Cartload of Clay* (1971), the final novel being unfinished and published posthumously. Meredith is a highly complex character who 'presents himself through the autobiographical fiction as morose and devious, opportunistic and full of self-doubt. The whole structure implied in the title of *My Brother Jack* is of an ideal that is never realised, and of a contrasting success that is hollow

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[96] George Johnston to Phillip Knightley, cited in Peter Sekuless, *A Handful of Hacks* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 91.
[97] Kim Torney, "Johnston, George Henry (1912-1970)" in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, 362.
[98] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, xii.
[99] F. H. Mares, "Biography and Fiction: George Johnston's Meredith Trilogy and Garry Kinnane's Biography", *Australian Literary Studies* 13, no. 3 (1988): 358.

and bogus'.[100] Meredith becomes a war correspondent towards the end of *My Brother Jack*, while *The Far Road* focuses solely on his experiences in the role. The key problem with using these novels as sources is, of course, the degree to which the fiction matches the reality. To what extent can some of Meredith's thoughts and experiences be seen as an accurate relation of Johnston's? As Graeme Kinross Smith has so eloquently put it, 'to probe George Johnston's life is to feel it like a constant ghost walking a few paces distant from the events portrayed in the novel'.[101]

What is evident is that Johnston drew upon his own thoughts, feelings and reflections on his life experiences in the creation of Meredith—he was, as Kinross Smith notes, 'in essence and spirit writing about himself'.[102] Meredith's experiences do, after all, closely match Johnston's, and the character seems to me to offer him a way to work through and reflect on some of his defining life experiences from the distance of time, offering a kind of catharsis. As Mark McKenna has written of the historian Manning Clark's writing, 'The past becomes [for Clark] the site for expressing and working through his deepest feelings'.[103] Johnston, I believe, was doing something similar through his writing of Meredith. What matters is not the absolute accuracy of the events or characters depicted in the novels—many characters are, of course, either composites of multiple people that Johnston knew or are greatly dramatised—but the sense that Johnston is conveying something meaningful about his experiences through Meredith.

Writing about the autobiographical form and the fictions that it contains, historian Barbara Cain has noted that our interest in the genre is not purely about discovering the facts of what happened and their truthfulness, but rather 'in understanding how or why an individual might have seen an event in a particular way, or in exploring what their recollections or reconstruction reveal about their mindset or world view'.[104] Johnston himself writes in the author's note to *Clean Straw for Nothing* that although the novel and its predecessor, *My Brother Jack*, are works of fiction, they are 'largely autobiographical' novels which are 'pegged to a background of actual autobiographical experience' and are 'a very free rendering of the truth'.[105] As such, the character of Meredith can provide us with a valuable insight into how Johnston reflected on his younger self and his work as a war correspondent even though incidents and characters in Meredith's fictional life are sometimes dramatised or fabricated.

Despite his later disappointment with his role as a war correspondent, partly as a result of his regret that he did not fight, Johnston owed much of his later life and career to his success in the role. He met his second wife, the famous writer Charmian Clift, towards the end of the

[100] *Ibid.*, 358.
[101] Graeme Kinross Smith, "Coming Late Into the Light—Our Brother George and the Johnston Story as Recent Australian History", *Westerly* 32, no. 1 (1987): 23.
[102] *Ibid.*, 24.
[103] Mark McKenna, "Being There: The Strange History of Manning Clark", *The Monthly*, no. 21 (2007): 27.
[104] Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 75.
[105] George Johnston, author's note to *Clean Straw for Nothing* (London: Collins, 1969).

war and the two remained in a highly tempestuous relationship until her suicide in July 1969, almost exactly one year prior to Johnston's own death of tuberculosis. Johnston was, for the entirety of his life, a 'keen opportunist' who sought to use his journalism as a springboard to fame and life as a novelist.[106] Though he published his first novel, *Death Takes Small Bites*, in 1948, he remained in journalism until late 1954, having moved to Britain in 1951 to lead the Associated Newspapers Services' London office. Having given up journalism and moved to the Greek islands of Kalymnos followed by Hydra in 1956, Johnston wrote novels as he had written his journalism: at breakneck speed. His work was, however, by and large a critical and commercial failure prior to the publication of *My Brother Jack*, which won the Miles Franklin Award in 1964. The novel and its sequels tapped into a number of relevant contemporary themes, such as the impact of the First World War and the Depression on the Australian sense of national identity, the nature of expatriatism, and the exploration of the archetypal Australian hero.[107] As a prominent and widely recognised cultural figure who engaged with the fundamental questions of what it meant to be Australian, Johnston's role as a war correspondent could not be left out of this group biography.

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If Osmar White was concerned with the absolute factual integrity of his journalism, George Johnston, who flew into New Guinea with White in February 1942 as the war correspondent for the *Argus* (and Australia's first accredited newspaperman), had somewhat different journalistic concerns. Having grown up in a working-class family in the Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick, Johnston originally saw journalism as a way to pull himself out of the dreary suburbia so evocatively described in *My Brother Jack*. 'What was so terrifying about these suburbs', David Meredith notes towards the beginning of the novel, 'was that they accepted their mediocrity. They were worse than slums'.[108] Certainly there was an element of snobbishness in Johnston's perception of his early environment and its culture (or supposed lack thereof)—his sister-in-law recalled, for example, that when his career in journalism began to take off, 'He would drive past our house in his beautiful little car and never even think to pay us a visit'—but it was certainly not an unhappy childhood.[109]

The son of a tram driver and a nurse, Johnston's childhood was a comfortable one in which he was free to pursue his various artistic and literary interests (in contrast to the abusive childhood of Meredith depicted in *My Brother Jack*). Born in 1912, the legacy of the First World War featured prominently in Johnston's early years. His father was a veteran of Gallipoli and the Western Front, while his mother had cared for wounded soldiers at

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[106] Paul Genoni and Tanya Dalziell, *Half the Perfect World: Writers, Dreamers and Drifters on Hydra, 1955-1964* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2018), 4.
[107] Mares, "Biography and Fiction: George Johnston's Meredith Trilogy", 362. See also Susan McKernan, *A Question of Commitment: Australian Literature in the Twenty Years After the War* (Sydney: Routledge, 1989), 218-19.
[108] George Johnston, *My Brother Jack* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2013 edn, first published 1964), 33.
[109] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 33.

Melbourne's South Caulfield Hospital.[110] Like many Australians of that era, Johnston grew up in an environment which celebrated stories imbued with Anzac heroism and which retained a 'heightened sense of Britishness'.[111] Johnston's father, who was born and raised in Bendigo, viewed Britain as 'home', while his mother shared this brand of what the historian Neville Meaney has called 'British race patriotism'.[112]

What is clear is that Johnston's typical Melbourne upbringing in the inter-war period provided him with a comfortable enough platform from which to pursue his interests, along with the motivation to strive for something more beyond Australian suburbia. The written word provided a kind of imaginative escape for Johnston, but also had the potential to supply a real pathway to more interesting environs and social distinction. 'Fumblingly, hardly even conscious of what I was doing', Johnston wrote in *My Brother Jack*, 'I was setting out to try to side-step a world I didn't have the courage to face'.[113]

This thought had, of course, occurred to other aspiring writers: on growing up in Melbourne during the Depression, Alan Marshall wrote in the final instalment of his autobiography, *In Mine Own Heart*, that 'There lay over Melbourne, as over all Australia, a mass hopelessness that touched everyone, even those who felt secure. It was impossible to escape being affected by it'.[114] Though Johnston's living situation was far from desperate heading into the Depression, there was a certain restlessness within him which fuelled his artistic endeavours. This restlessness gained apace due to a perceived stagnant culture and a desire to rise above its constraints. Writing in *Overland* in 1964, John McLaren noted that the 'deserts of pre-war suburbia' as depicted in *My Brother Jack* are 'a symbol of a whole dreary middle-class culture of respectability and desperation', and that the Depression 'marked the beginning of the age of urban consciousness'.[115] As Johnston's own consciousness about the limitations of his surroundings grew, so too did the opportunities that spurred his cultural awakening.

Johnston's early artistic endeavours primarily took the form of writing as well as painting and drawing. It was Johnston's artwork which appeared to show the most promise at a young age—his skill in drawing gave him thoughts of a career as a draughtsman.[116] While serving an apprenticeship as a lithographer, having completed his schooling at 15, he began attending art classes at the National Gallery School in 1927.[117] Through this, Johnston slowly began to mix in circles quite different to those he had become accustomed to. Though he was shy at first and dropped out of the classes towards the end of the year, he re-enrolled in 1929 and

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[110] *Ibid.*, 5-6.
[111] Frank Bongiorno, "The Search for a Solution: 1923-1939", in *Cambridge History of Australia*, Vol. 2, eds. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84-86.
[112] Garry Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 5; Neville Meaney, "Britishness and Australia: Some Reflections", in *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity*, eds. Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (London: Cass, 2003), 121.
[113] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 56.
[114] Alan Marshall, *In Mine Own Heart* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1963), 90.
[115] John McLaren, "The Depression—and Beyond", *Overland* 30 (1964): 54-55.
[116] Kinross Smith, "Coming Late Into the Light", 25.
[117] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 16.

soon struck up a friendship with a number of young artists, particularly Sam Atyeo.[118] Atyeo, more artistically talented than Johnston, was already starting to make a name for himself in Australia as an avant-garde painter. He adopted a Modernist approach which challenged the general preoccupation with post-impressionism of other Australian artists.[119] Johnston's interaction with Atyeo and those like him at the Gallery School (Sidney Nolan, later a good friend, was five years younger than Johnston and also a great admirer of Atyeo, attending the Gallery School from 1934) no doubt encouraged his artistic and intellectual precociousness.[120] Atyeo, described by Richard Haese as 'the most dynamic force among the younger painters in Melbourne during the early 1930s', often held gatherings at his studio during which free flowing discussions took place on issues like philosophy, politics, music and, of course, art.[121] As a regular attendee, the influence of Atyeo and his peers was significant for Johnston with his roots in working-class Elsternwick. The character of Sam Burlington in *My Brother Jack*, who welcomes David Meredith into his bohemian lifestyle, is based on him.[122]

Given this artistic and cultural grounding, it is little surprise that Johnston's first serious pieces of writing emerged while enrolled at the Gallery School. These centred around his love of ships, which Johnston regularly sketched on his frequent trips to Melbourne's wharves, taking in the bustling atmosphere.[123] Researching the history of various ships, interviewing their crews, and typing up articles based on his findings became Johnston's favourite pastime—such was his love of all things maritime that he co-founded the Shiplovers' Society of Victoria in 1930.[124] This was the beginning of Johnston's journalism, which emerged quite organically from his trips to the wharves. When some of his articles started to be published by the *Morning Star* and the *Argus*, for which he was paid, Johnston likely began to think that journalism offered a real and viable way to realise his ambitions of climbing the social ladder and escaping the constraints of his youth. He would be provided with a voice to comment on a whole range of issues which caught his attention. Clearly Johnston wanted to make some form of contribution to Australian culture. After the war, for example, he noted in the *Sunday Sun* that Australia was in need of 'a virile, indigenous creative art' and that the country 'doesn't believe very much in encouraging culture'.[125] Writing seemed to be a way in which he might make his cultural mark, and journalism provided a convenient entry point to this.

When he became a cadet at the *Argus* in 1933, therefore, there can be little surprise that Johnston devoted all his energy to the job, seeking to climb the ranks. Since the late nineteenth-century, the *Argus* had been an established and respected paper in Australia,

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[118] *Ibid.*, 16-20.
[119] Daniel Mandel, 'Atyeo, Samuel Laurence (Sam) (1910–1990)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, ANU, 2007.
[120] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 19.
[121] Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors: The Revolutionary Years of Australian Art* (Melbourne: Allen Lane, 1981), 20; Kinane, *George Johnston*, 19.
[122] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 19.
[123] Kinross Smith, "Coming Late Into the Light", 26.
[124] *Ibid.*, 26; Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 22.
[125] George Johnston, "Why Write a Book?", *Sunday Sun* (Sydney), 28 Nov 1948, 6.

described by the historian Sybil Nolan as ‘aggressively conservative in its politics’, its staff tending to be ‘regarded as Australian journalism’s elite’.[126] The paper’s prestige likely encouraged Johnston’s excitement at having found a berth in journalism, fuelling his determination to succeed in the profession. Placed at first on the shipping rounds, he made quite an impression on his colleagues. As the notable journalist and future fellow war correspondent Geoffrey Hutton, who inspired the character of Gavin Turley in *My Brother Jack*, noted:

> When he arrived as a cadet reporter on the old *Argus*, George Johnston was a thin, jumpy young man carrying an enormous head of steam. There was no stopping him. In the humble job of shipping reporter he ran faster, talked to more ships’ captains and collected more stories than anyone else … He was a fast talker and an avid listener, a man who could sense a story and frame it before he approached his battered and over-worked typewriter. When he was hot after an idea he would type like a hand drill, biting his fingernails and smoking his way through cigarettes by the packet. He was always impatient to write, to hammer out his story to a dramatic finish.[127]

This desire to excel and impress likely came from a place of insecurity. Many of Johnston’s colleagues on the paper and on the rounds were better educated and came from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Most journalists working for major papers had university degrees or a senior certificate from a private school at the least.[128] Journalism had become increasingly professionalised, with the AJA itself viewing university degrees ‘as the quickest, most efficient way to acquire higher status’.[129] Johnston did not have this background and likely viewed his entry into the profession as an uphill struggle. When discussing the makeup of the paper’s staff in *My Brother Jack*, Johnston has Gavin Turley describe Meredith as ‘the outsider, the maverick’ and from the ‘University of Hard Knocks’, in contrast to the ‘privileged young pissants’ of the office.[130] This feeling of being the ‘outsider’ in the newsroom played upon Johnston’s mind for some time, and resulted in his desire to outdo his peers, often by working alone at a furious pace to ‘get the story’ first as he progressed beyond the shipping rounds—a practice he maintained as a war correspondent. Osmar White noted of their time in New Guinea together, for instance, that Johnston ‘was not a good sharer of information. If George went off to see the General [whereas] most of the other blokes would say what the hell he was saying, George wouldn’t tell you: he was not prepared to. He was after the beat, which made him a damn good newspaperman’.[131]

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[126] Sybil Nolan, “Manifest Editorial Differences: *The Age* and *The Argus* in the 1920s and 30s”, in *The Argus: The Life and Death of a Great Melbourne Newspaper (1846-1957)*, ed. Muriel Porter (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2003), 32-33.
[127] Kinross Smith, “Coming Late Into the Light”, 27.
[128] David Conley, “A Telling Story: Five Journalist-Novelists and Australia’s Writing Culture”, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2003, 237.
[129] Kate Darian-Smith and Jackie Dickenson, “University Education and the Quest for the Professionalisation of Journalism in Australia between the World Wars”, *Media History* 27, no. 4 (2021): 496.
[130] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 242-3.
[131] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 43.

The writer Charmian Clift, Johnston's second wife, noted this determination to assert himself and his work over others, writing shortly before she died that 'he is inclined to be a conversational bully—being better informed about more things than most, liking to dominate, and having a most devastating turn of wit … He is also a steam-roller in his purposes'.[132] While getting the story was, for Johnston, very much about getting ahead in the profession, it was also about asserting himself as an individual who made up for his lack of formal education with raw talent and an unrivalled work ethic. Journalism provided him with a platform from which he might make significant literary and cultural contributions to Australia, as well as the status he so desperately sought. On becoming a journalist, for example, Johnston has Meredith say that 'It was one thing to be a lithographic apprentice, it was something altogether different to be a newspaper reporter! I had a sense of being somebody. I had a frame around me'.[133] Journalism was, at this stage of his life, a bridge out of suburban normality and carried with it the possibility of achieving greater literary successes. Garry Kinnane notes of Johnston the journalist that:

> Compared with them [his journalist colleagues], Johnston felt uneducated, insecure, and that he was something of an imposter. Consequently, in a perfectly understandable attempt to compensate for these feelings, his behaviour in front of others was often know-all, ultra-confident and self-important. He would, in other words, determinedly out-do them in areas where they had an advantage. This included writing, since they all wrote seriously quite apart from their standard journalism, and it was part of Johnston's ambition, too, to be a better and more successful writer than any of them. There was always, therefore, a sense in which his relations with these and other journalists had, in its very gregariousness, a competitive edge to it.[134]

Journalism, therefore, was not enough for Johnston the writer. There had to be greater literary achievements for him to point to which would justify his quick ascendency of the ranks and fuel his ego. As he gained promotion at the *Argus*, Johnston always kept in mind how his journalism might serve as a stepping-stone to books.[135] No doubt the time spent in the company of those like Sam Atyeo had encouraged his literary ambitions. Likely also he was aware of prominent novelists like Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck who had 'worked successfully as journalists prior to their recognition as novelists' (both of whom spent periods of their lives as war correspondents).[136] Wartime seemed like a perfect opportunity to start creating a more significant body of works, building on feature pieces to write books. Johnston first did this in 1941 with *Grey Gladiator*, a stirring account of the exploits of HMAS *Sydney* in the Mediterranean, written after producing a report of the ship's return to Sydney. Writing in the book's introduction, Johnston notes that 'by the time I had said goodbye to the ship and the men three days later the idea for this book became fixed in my mind'.[137]

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[132] Charmian Clift, "My Husband George", *POL*, no. 9 (1969): 83.
[133] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 171-2.
[134] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 98.
[135] Genoni and Dalziell, *Half the Perfect World*, 1.
[136] Mimi Reisel Gladstein, "Mr. Novelist Goes to War: Hemingway and Steinbeck as Front-line Correspondents", *War, Literature & the Arts* 15, nos. 1-2 (2003): 259.
[137] George Johnston, *Grey Gladiator* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941).

The success of the book earned him a promotion to A grade journalist and brought Johnston even further to the attention of his superiors.[138] The managing editor of the *Argus* (and later Director-General of Army Public Relations), Errol Knox, viewed with great excitement the promise displayed by Johnston, sending him on further war-related specialist assignments. A 10,000 mile tour of Australia's defence areas in 1941 resulted in numerous syndicated articles and the book *Australia at War*, which itself had been preceded by *Battle of the Seaways*.[139] Journalism had, therefore, become a tool by which Johnston could work at his literary craft. His good relations with powerful people like Errol Knox contributed to this ability to gain access to and write about stories that not only interested him, but provided fertile material for longer pieces of work. When Knox, impressed by the speed and content of his war-related assignments appointed him Australia's first accredited war correspondent in January 1942, therefore, Johnston likely recognised the possibilities that the role offered for his career. If nothing else, his experiences in active war zones would certainly provide material for further books, as well as inspiration for novels.[140]

How did Johnston think about his journalistic craft and the ethics of the profession at this stage in his career? As is well known, Johnston came to view his journalistic career, particularly his time spent as a war correspondent, in a dim light.[141] Certainly there was always a great concern with what the work meant for *himself*—his career, his social status, and his ability to use it as a springboard to 'higher' literary feats—rather than a particularly great concern for the 'truth' or the meaning of his reporting. His novel *The Far Road*, published in 1962, offers a peculiar kind of critical self-reflection about his and other journalists' conduct, both in the theatre of war and generally. The novel is, according to Martin Flanagan, the '[most] significant Australian novel written on the subject of journalism'.[142] It is also, I believe, the best insight not only into how Johnston viewed his wartime work in retrospect, but also how he thought of the profession in general terms. Ostensibly a work of fiction, the book can be read as a kind of thesis on journalism or bitter fable, one that brings to mind Janet Malcolm's famous statement that 'Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible'.[143]

In *The Far Road* Johnston contrasts two war correspondents—David Meredith, who has grown disillusioned with the war and the profession, and Bruce Conover, a photographer who remains emotionally uninvolved in the tragedy unfolding around him—as they cover the mass exodus of people from the city of Kweilin in southern China along the road to Liuchow. Though the story is fictional, it builds on Johnston's experiences as a war correspondent in

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[138] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 35.
[139] *Ibid.*, 35.
[140] David Conley, "The magic of journalism in George Johnston's fiction", *Australian Studies in Journalism* 1, no. 10-11 (2002): 116.
[141] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 67.
[142] Martin Flanagan, "George Johnston and Charmian Clift: The journalist as writer, the writer as journalist", *Overland* 168 (2002): 5.
[143] Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (London: Granta Books, 2004 edition), 1.

China and reveals how, even if he was not thinking too deeply about it at the time of the events, he recognised in hindsight certain qualities within himself as a journalist that he was not proud of. Johnston noted the importance he placed on 'getting the story' first and the inherent selfishness that this often necessitated. 'Newspaper men', he writes, 'seldom were deeply friendly with each other, for their work demanded too much of secrecy and of individual exploitation, too much that was guileful. Duplicity was inextricably woven into the *modus operandi* of the game'.[144] Later, Meredith states that 'To me, once the story is broken it's broken. If somebody else gets it, it's dead as far as I'm concerned'.[145] Johnston seems to recognise here the extent of his personal ambition to get ahead in the 'game', a concern which had driven him to believe that his writing was destined for things greater than mere reporting. 'You could only be a good reporter so long as that spark of the juvenile stayed with you', he writes:

> so long as you *believed* in the game, remained enthusiastic, continued to think there was some tingling excitement in being "on the spot", the first to see something, the first to *know* … And once you had lost that juvenile spark you were no longer a good journalist, because you had betrayed the basic *credo* of the business. You could still be a clever journalist, yes, but that was quite a different thing … One day, when he got tired of being clever, he would get out, and perhaps then he would do some real writing.[146]

Though there are of course difficulties with using a work of fiction to uncover how a person thought and felt about their experiences at the time they occurred, *The Far Road* conveys the sense of an author struggling to come to terms with their past work. With the self-reflection that the passing of years allows, Johnston critically examines his younger self in a way that calls into question the way that he and other journalists set about their craft. Knowledge gathering in the field is often a result of 'professional chicanery', the journalist is usually afforded only a 'fleeting glimpse of truth' and is all too eager to 'substitute abstractions for the realities', while Meredith in particular, always insecure, is 'desperate for reassurance'.[147] 'In a later age', he writes in the book's most memorable passage, 'Judas would have been a journalist'.[148]

This all reflects the fact that, at this point in his career, Johnston was so much concerned with where journalism could take him that he often placed his personal interests above all else. The war offered him opportunity as a writer. Though he was making a name for himself before the outbreak of fighting, it was the war which enabled Johnston to achieve the kind of status that he had sought from a young age. As Garry Kinnane has written, 'that success [in the newspaper world] was to a large extent a trick, a slice of luck dealt to him by the war and by his own capacity to "sell himself" to the right people. Underneath he believed he was not

[144] George Johnston, *The Far Road* (Melbourne: Fontana Books, 1987 edn, first published 1962), 47.
[145] *Ibid.*, 53.
[146] *Ibid.*, 49.
[147] *Ibid.*, 75, 146, 199, 174.
[148] *Ibid.*, 75.

the brilliant journalist he was taken to be'.[149] This meant that, while the war certainly enabled the furthering of Johnston's ambitions, his approach and experiences during that time made for a rather lonely existence as a war correspondent, one that Johnston came to reflect on with a deep sense of regret.

[149] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 84.

Chapter Three

Kenneth Slessor

The poet and journalist Kenneth Slessor has been characterised by Dennis Haskell as 'a biographer's nightmare'.[150] In the only full-length biography of Slessor, Geoffrey Dutton (himself a poet and writer) notes that 'The life he shared with anyone else is scarcely ever allowed to emerge in his poetry; he kept no journals; he wrote hardly any letters; almost no-one ever dared to speak to him about his private life'.[151] On top of this, as Haskell writes, there were many different sides to Slessor's character and career: 'It is possible to see many aspects of Slessor, or to view him in a number of different roles. Putting the roles together, however, seems impossible'.[152] This is because Slessor, now widely recognised in Australia for his poetry, particularly the 1939 poem 'Five Bells', was for much of his life far more well known for his journalism. This dualism between his journalism and his poetry was the cause of some unease for him.

Born in Orange in 1901, Slessor showed an early interest in poetry and was published at a young age, however he embarked on a career in journalism to provide a financially secure life for himself while he continued to write poetry on the side. As he said in an interview in 1966, long after he had ceased writing poetry, 'I don't think at any time poetry was paid to a point where it excited or tempted the poet to continue'.[153] Though he wrote a substantial amount of light verse, most regularly for the tabloid newspaper *Smith's Weekly* (which Slessor joined in 1927, remaining there until his appointment as the Official Australian War Correspondent in April 1940), Slessor was a serious poet who was 'interested in technique, in technical experiment, and in moving poetry in Australia away from the bush and into the city'.[154] Although Slessor had a lasting affinity for such nationalistic myths as the Anzac legend, he 'could not stand the Australianism of the Lawson-Paterson tradition' or the romanticisation of the bush.[155] The satirical *Smith's Weekly* appealed to him because it cut through old fashioned ideas about Australia and appealed to the urban 'everyman'.[156] The paper also strongly supported the cause of returned servicemen and its 'Unofficial History of the A.I.F.' was one of its most popular regular columns, running from 1924 until operations ceased in 1950.[157]

Slessor's admiration for the Australian fighting man led to him applying for and being offered the role of Australia's Official War Correspondent, following in the footsteps of Charles Bean. Rather than being employed by a news organisation, the Official

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[150] Dennis Haskell, "'My Rather Tedious Hero': A Portrait of Kenneth Slessor", *Westerly* 36, no.3 (1991): 27.
[151] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 104.
[152] Haskell, "A Portrait of Kenneth Slessor", 27.
[153] Kenneth Slessor interviewed by John Thompson, "Poetry in Australia: Kenneth Slessor", *Southerly* 26, no. 3 (1966): 190.
[154] Adrian Caesar, *Kenneth Slessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.
[155] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 119.
[156] *Ibid.*, 119.
[157] *Ibid.*, 120; see also Roderick Grant, "Kenneth Slessor at *Smith's Weekly*, 1927-1939", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2021, 22.

Correspondent was appointed directly by the Government to provide coverage relevant to Australia's war effort. This was seemingly the journalistic role of his dreams, yet Slessor's time in the role was an unsuccessful one and his anti-authority mindset (stemming from his days as a humorous writer for *Smith's* and other publications) eventually resulted in his resignation in February 1944. Having fallen out of favour with the Army hierarchy, he jumped before he was pushed. Slessor harboured resentment over this for the rest of his life. Like other war correspondents in this study, he had a particular lasting dislike for General Thomas Blamey. Listening to a children's radio quiz show long after the war, Slessor noted in his diary his delight that one child, in answer to the question 'Who is the "Dirty General"?' (to which the correct answer was Jan Smuts), responded with 'Blamey'. Slessor wrote that the question might better have been phrased as 'Who is the dirtiest of our Generals?'.[158]

Clement Semmler, who edited Slessor's war diaries and despatches, has echoed this characterisation of his war service, writing that:

> the early part of Slessor's diaries reveal the idealistic and indeed, patriotic enthusiasm with which he went about his work. But … his high-minded sense of purpose began to be eroded by such factors as bumbling military officialdom, the over-cautious and obstinate attitudes of military censors, the shoddy behaviour and machinations of some high-ranking army officers he encountered and, at the other end, the slovenly manner in which his carefully and conscientiously written despatches were treated by some of Australia's leading newspapers.[159]

Despite Slessor's struggles in the role (which was never clearly defined), however, his despatches did retain a highly accomplished literary quality to them. Though they were hacked to pieces by censors and editors, 'history may yet be on his side' with regards to their merits.[160]

His wartime experiences no doubt had a lasting effect on Slessor and undermined his confidence. Though he continued to work in newspapers until his death in 1971, he published just one more poem after the war. The writer, producer and documentary maker Ron Maslyn Williams, who had worked alongside Slessor during the war for a time, later recalled that after the war Slessor stopped being 'a writer in the sense of a creative literary writer. I think he'd stopped having anything to believe in any more, he'd stopped wanting to be anything else but just coast along'.[161] Slessor himself wrote to the poet Grace Perry that 'poetry is a bitter and unrewarding pursuit'.[162] Clearly the war was a scarring experience for Slessor. Where at one time he saw the journalistic assignment of his dreams, he later found a hollow and unfulfilling job, stifled by military officialdom. The conflict between his creative and free-roaming instincts as a poet clashed with the demands of a role that required toeing the government and military line and the passing of control over his writing to those he felt

[158] Kenneth Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 2, folder 1, NLA.
[159] Semmler, "War Correspondents in Australian Literature", 199.
[160] Haskell, "'My Rather Tedious Hero'", 29.
[161] Ron Maslyn Williams, cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 290.
[162] Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 274.

unworthy of such power. As Slessor's war service is still relatively overlooked in favour of the study of his poetry, he is an essential character to include in this biography.

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Les Robinson's work as a humorous and absurdist writer in early to mid-twentieth century Sydney allowed him, in the words of Kenneth Slessor, to 'daub his face with alien chalk and join the chain gang of the clowns'.[163] Slessor might easily have been referring to himself, so well-known was he for his light verse and humorous journalism prior to the Second World War. Yet beneath this façade of the whimsical and witty journalist, this clownish entertainer of the readers of the *Smith's Weekly* tabloid, Slessor was a serious and deeply well-read poet. Upon reading Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* for the first time at school, he was 'shocked by the presence of strangeness and beauty in the printed line'.[164] Poetry was his literary passion, but born out of a knowledge that it would not pay the bills he turned to journalism, writing his poems at night. This compromise between artistic ambition and the reality of the financial value of his written words characterises Slessor's life before the war. In the only 'cradle to grave' biography of Slessor, Geoffrey Dutton remarks that he 'remains an enigma, but also a very subtle master of the mask'.[165] Journalism served as a kind of mask for Slessor the serious poet and this duality was a fundamental aspect of his identity before the war. His poems dealt 'intimately with themes of fragmented personalities, role playing, conformism and artistic compromise'.[166] This understanding that he had reached within himself resulted in a journalistic philosophy that was never clearly defined if it was ever present at all.

Perhaps this suggestion is surprising. Slessor came from a learned and artistically distinguished family. Both his great-grandfather, who was friends with Beethoven and Berlioz, and his grandfather were well-known and highly respected musicians in their day.[167] His English-born father, Robert, was a mining engineer who had completed his studies in Belgium. Robert filled the family home in Orange, where Kenneth was born, with books and culture. He insisted, for example, that the family speak French at the dinner table and encouraged free-thinking on all range of issues.[168] Kenneth recognised the significance of this upbringing, recalling that 'I owe to my father one of the most precious of all gifts that can be bestowed by a father on a son—complete freedom to form my own mind and come to my own beliefs, without the imposition of those arbitrary religious or political dogmas which youth so often is forced to accept without enquiry'.[169]

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[163] Kenneth Slessor, introduction to Les Robinson, *The Giraffe's Uncle* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1933).
[164] Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 9, folder 1, NLA.
[165] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 330.
[166] Grant, "Kenneth Slessor at *Smith's Weekly*", 18.
[167] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 1-2.
[168] *Ibid.*, 3-4.
[169] Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 9, folder 1, NLA.

The start in life that he had been given facilitated Slessor's early literary endeavours, which were first published in a serious magazine in 1917 when he was just sixteen. The magazine concerned, *The Bulletin*, had been at the forefront of nationalist literature for over twenty years when Slessor's poetry first found its way into its pages.[170] Though he did later confess that 'I still blush inwardly when I recollect this work', Slessor's first published writing reflected his lifelong interest in and respect for the Anzac tradition.[171] The poem 'Goin'', written from the perspective of a dying Australian soldier at Gallipoli who dreams of Sydney Harbour, fitted in well with *The Bulletin*'s brand of sentimental nationalism and was soon followed by another Anzac-inspired poem, 'France—1918'. This interest in the Australian 'Digger' from his earliest forays into professional writing would later be a significant reason for Slessor's appointment as Official War Correspondent in 1940. He was forming a Romantic conception of all things Anzac which, while not being remotely unique, coloured much of his life in writing.

Despite having a further six poems published in *The Bulletin* in 1919, it was fast becoming clear to Slessor that the writing of poetry was not a sustainable way to earn a comfortable living in early twentieth-century Australia. With the formation of the Australian Journalists' Association in 1910, journalism was becoming increasingly professionalised and could be relied upon by competent writers to provide a secure source of income.[172] Writing in 1907, the journalist Alfred Buchanan noted that the profession up until this time had been a precarious one: '[journalists] have one standard of living, unorthodoxy; one bond of fellowship, Bohemian; one pass port to success, ability; one aversion, dullness'.[173] The establishment of the AJA, which helped to ensure good working conditions and a reasonable and reliable wage, along with the growth of the newspaper industry in general (there were twenty-six daily papers in Australia by 1924), made journalism an increasingly attractive trade.[174] For Slessor it may well have been a trade-*off*: he could continue to work on and publish his poetry while still dedicating his days to writing. Perhaps he embraced Horace Greeley's comment that 'Journalism will kill you, but it will keep you alive while you're at it'.[175]

Slessor wrote in 1923 to his great mentor, the writer and artist Norman Lindsay (whom he had met the previous year), that the 'material reasons are numerous' for entering journalism.[176] He had become a cadet at the Sydney *Sun* newspaper three years prior, turning down a bursary to study science at the University of Sydney, before graduating to 'junior

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[170] Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1954).
[171] Slessor interviewed by Thompson, "Poetry in Australia: Kenneth Slessor", 190.
[172] Clem Lloyd, *Profession, Journalist: A History of the Australian Journalists' Association* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1985).
[173] Alfred Buchanan, *The Real Australia* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), 49-51.
[174] K. S. Inglis, "The Daily Papers", in *Australian Civilization: A Symposium*, ed. Peter Coleman (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1962), 147; for a useful overview of this period in Australian newspaper history, see also David Conley, "A Telling Story: Five Journalist-Novelists and Australia's Writing Culture", 72-74.
[175] Horace Greeley was a nineteenth-century newspaper editor who founded the *New-York Tribune*; quoted in Sheryl Oring and Pete Danko, "Kissing the Newsroom Goodbye", *American Journalism Review* 17, no. 5 (1995): 31.
[176] Slessor to Norman Lindsay, Lindsay family papers, ca. 1893-1963, MLMSS 742/14/73b-74, SLNSW.

reporter' in 1921 and 'general reporter' by 1923.[177] In the same letter, Slessor complained that:

> It becomes daily harder for me to arrange some suitable mental excuse or compromise for being on a newspaper … at present I have decided to view my vocation merely as a sort of challenge, such as a chess-puzzle, and regard it in the light of the interesting problem of how to make people, in whom I am not interested, interested in uninteresting facts.[178]

One gets the sense in this letter of a young person trying a bit too hard to impress their artistic mentor. As Dennis Haskell has commented about the letter, Slessor knew that Lindsay insisted 'that artists should devote themselves to their art, even to the point of totally ignoring normal relationships and family ceremonies' and therefore conceived of the letter as 'a chess match with an older master'.[179] He sought Lindsay's approval of his chosen life in journalism, justifying his decisions as if they were a kind of artistic experiment (making those in who he was not interested, 'interested in uninteresting facts'). Slessor did, after all, remain in journalism for the entirety of his life. Journalism was providing a comfortable life while he continued to write poetry, but it was not merely a job that he had to drag himself to each day. Though much of his journalism was light-hearted and hardly what one would describe as 'penetrating analysis' of the 'big issues' of the day, it was not devoid of literary merit.

This is true from his earliest years in the trade. For the *Sun* Slessor wrote about, as he recalled later, 'police courts, general news, Sunday features, interviews, State Parliament, country assignments, [and] theatrical reviews'.[180] Until he left in 1924 for a brief stint at the Melbourne *Punch* (which folded in late 1925), Slessor's most well-known writing was a regular column called 'Potted Parliament'.[181] This satirised politicians working at the State Parliament of New South Wales in a manner which struck a chord with readers. Despite his young age, the Newcastle *Sun* later reported (with some hyperbole) that Slessor 'inaugurated a new kind of political journalism' in the 1920s:

> impressionistic and graphic. He was turned loose on the State Assembly and painted pictures of the proceedings that had a very disturbing effect—on politicians. Slessor dismissed the most earnest efforts of perspiring politicians in a line or two of penetrating comment … This style of political comment is more common now, but few, if any, have achieved Slessor's air of serene detached approach.[182]

Slessor's political writing, according to the paper, gave him the status of 'a modern Junius'.[183] This scant regard for those with power and influence would later play a major part in his downfall as Official War Correspondent, but what is evident is the remarkable

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[177] Dennis Haskell, "Hyperborea vs Uninteresting Facts: Kenneth Slessor's Journalism in the Early 1920s", *Southerly* 52, no. 4 (1992): 16.
[178] Slessor to Norman Lindsay, MLMSS 742/14/73b-74, SLNSW.
[179] Haskell, "Hyperborea vs Uninteresting Facts", 18.
[180] Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 9, folder 1, NLA.
[181] Graeme Kinross Smith, "Kenneth Slessor", *Westerly* 23, no. 2 (1978): 52.
[182] *Sun* (Newcastle), 2 Apr 1940, 4.
[183] *Ibid*. Junius was the pseudonym of an unidentified author who wrote a series of satirical letters to the British newspaper the *Public Advertiser* between 1769 and 1772, mocking the political class of the day.

confidence and dismissiveness that Slessor had as a young journalist. 'Virtuous, but dull, again describe the operations of the Legislative Assembly' he wrote at the start of one of his 'Potted Parliament' columns, 'not even the most ardent flatterer of the Treasury benches could have called the evening an enlivening one'.[184] He excelled playing the detached, wryly amused observer.

Slessor's witty style appealed to the Melbourne-based tabloid *Punch*, which offered him the job of chief sub-editor in 1924. *Punch*'s attempt to revive its sagging readership numbers with satirical and humorous articles and cartoons seemed a perfect match for Slessor, who wrote 'a weekly humorous dialogue or article … various light verse and occasionally sneaked in a serious poem, not mentioned in the list of contents'.[185] Despite this, however, he was unhappy in Melbourne, writing to Norman Lindsay that 'I have been completely unhinged by this abode of deaconesses, primitive labourers and melancholy harlots', and *Punch* soon collapsed.[186] Though Slessor was not unhappy with the niche he had found for himself inside the world of Australian journalism, there was by this stage something of the frustrated artist about him. Writing to John Hetherington in the early 1960s about Slessor's life in journalism before the war, Norman Lindsay stated that:

> Ken was tormented by a lack of response to his poetry … he was fighting depression and the scepticism of any faith in his destiny as a poet … When he visited me here alone, he did not mind letting me see the black side of his struggle, the futility of writing poetry which nobody read … this is the penalty of all who seek perfection in art.[187]

By the time Slessor joined the *Smith's Weekly* tabloid in 1927 then, after a brief return to the *Sun*, he was frustrated by the lack of appetite and opportunities for his poetry. This is not to say that his serious poetic output was non-existent: his first book of poetry, *Thief of the Moon*, had been published in 1924, though it was 'printed on a hand-press by J. T. Kirtley in his Kiribilli bathroom' and quite possibly funded by Norman Lindsay, who illustrated the book.[188] It did not sell to any great extent and failed to make a mark in the literary world. Journalism, it seemed to his friends, was affecting how Slessor viewed his poetry. Jack Lindsay (a fellow writer and the son of Norman), for example, recalled of Slessor during this time that he 'was doing well as a journalist and had nothing of my hankering for hardship as a test of devotion [to his art]. Yet at the same time he was already chafing against the journalist yoke, afraid that he would never be able to liberate all his powers with the daily grind of reporting'.[189] Clearly Slessor's professional life as a journalist was something of a tightrope walk for him—never completely satisfied, but also never so frustrated that he would give it up. Geoffrey Dutton has written of 'Slessor's ambivalence about his journalistic career,

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[184] *Sun* (Sydney), 21 Sept 1923, 9.
[185] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 88-89.
[186] *Ibid*., 88.
[187] Norman Lindsay to John Hetherington, c. 1962, cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 159.
[188] Dennis Haskell, 'Slessor, Kenneth Adolf (1901-1971)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, ANU, 2002; Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 83.
[189] Jack Lindsay, *The Roaring Twenties* (London: Bodley Head, 1960), 55-6.

which was indeed the major crux of his life', but we must remember that Slessor never jumped off the tightrope to fixate on his art.

Smith's Weekly did, after all, have a similar worldview to Slessor, who later wrote that his time there (which lasted until he accepted the job as Official War Correspondent) 'with all its torments, irritations and frustrations, was the happiest chapter of my existence'.[190] The Anzac-inspired tendencies of the paper very much lined up with his interests, and he enjoyed the satirical angle that *Smith's* brought to the news of the day with its 'irreverent attitude towards the hypocrisy and self-importance it saw as endemic to Australian public life'.[191] The paper 'upheld the digger ethos, and gave prominence to war stories and digger humour'.[192] *Smith's* brand of political satire without concern for in-depth analysis or comment—the paper's co-founder and editor, Claude McKay, told his staff 'never investigate a story too far or you'll kill it'—suited Slessor's journalistic style.[193] Though its stories regularly veered into xenophobic and racist territory (which Slessor generally steered clear of), he was attracted to the paper's creative milieu and unique identity in Australia. [194] The cartoonist Jim Russell, for instance, remembered Slessor as being 'as much a part of the artists as he was a writer', fondly recalling the social atmosphere of the creative personalities at *Smith's*: 'the artists, the writers, even the business staff … would all get down to the pub next door, the Assembly, and that was really what we called "*Smith's* pub"'.[195]

Figure 3: Kenneth Slessor (in middle) with other staff of "Smith's Weekly", December 1936 (SLNSW)

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[190] Slessor, review of George Blaikie, *Remember Smith's Weekly?*, in *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Mar 1967.
[191] Grant, "Kenneth Slessor at *Smith's Weekly*", 21.
[192] Helen Doyle, "Smith's Weekly" in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, 594.
[193] Douglas Stewart, *A Man of Sydney: An Appreciation of Kenneth Slessor* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1977), 40.
[194] Grant, "Kenneth Slessor at *Smith's Weekly*", 41.
[195] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 116.

The fun and creative environment at *Smith's* appealed to Slessor, who became what fellow journalist George Blaikie described as the paper's 'Jack-of-all trades': he wrote about sport and was 'the official office poet, leader writer, film reviewer, special writer, satirist and doer of anything else the gods wished to dump on him'.[196] What is nowhere evident both before and during his time at *Smith's* is a particularly strong interest in such things as journalistic ethics, 'getting the story' before competitors, or engaging with politics in a serious and considered way. If one considers his lectures to cadet journalists at the *Sun* after the war, for example, there is nowhere to be found an attempt to grapple with the practical or ethical pursuit of news. Rather, Slessor talks at great length about language and the use of words, particularly what he referred to as 'Nine-em English'. By this he meant 'newspaper English ['journalese'], forced on newspapers by the mechanical limitations of the tabloid-sized sheet with a column 9 ems wide into which headings have to be fitted'.[197] It must have been somewhat repetitive to attend Slessor's lectures as a cadet: 'Once again my subject is Newspaper English', he begins one.[198] There was more to reporting, he argued, 'than asking questions, gathering opinions, getting facts … Facts are only your raw materials. It requires words—precise, virile and accurate words, properly linked together—to make you a real reporter'.[199] He lists Osmar White as one of the best practitioners of this. Doubtless White would have approved of Slessor's meticulousness with language, but whereas White stressed 'accuracy, judgement, integrity and foresight' in his lectures, Slessor's hardly strayed beyond the use of the English language.[200]

This seeming lack of engagement with the ethics of journalism had been apparent to several of his contemporaries. The poet and journalist Edgar Holt told Geoffrey Dutton that 'Ken put it very simply to me: "they [newspaper proprietors] have views, I express them"', while Alex Sheppard recalled that, during Slessor's time with the *Sun* after the Second World War, Slessor said 'I'm not the owner of the *Sun*, I don't make the policy, they do … I never think of bringing in any ideas myself'.[201] It was true also of his time at *Smith's Weekly*, where Slessor 'wrote as an insider at the paper, within the ideological parameters set down by its market driven and conservative management'.[202] This is indicative of what John Douglas Pringle, who was editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1952 to 1957, called Slessor's 'total division of … sensibility and intelligence'. 'I cannot imagine', Pringle continued, 'how he stood all those years working for the Melbourne *Punch* and *Smith's Weekly* … I did question him on this. He took the simple attitude that he was well paid to do the job, which was not very difficult, and was quite prepared to write whatever he was told by the editor'.[203]

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[196] George Blaikie, *Remember Smith's Weekly?: A Biography of an Uninhibited National Australian Newspaper* (Sydney: Rigby, 1966), 130.
[197] Slessor papers, MS 3020, Box 9, folder 1, NLA.
[198] Slessor papers, MS 3020, Box 14, folder 6, NLA.
[199] *Ibid*.
[200] White papers, MS Acc06.177, box 7, folder 39, NLA.
[201] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 255.
[202] Grant, "Kenneth Slessor at *Smith's Weekly*", 57.
[203] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 304-5.

Slessor's retrospective claim that his time at *Smith's* was 'the happiest chapter of my existence', therefore, does seem to leave out the inner turmoil that he suffered beneath his journalist's mask. Though he took it seriously, the convenience of his job as a journalist clashed, at least to some extent, with his artistic sensibilities. Trotting out lines from his editors surely could not have been entirely fulfilling for someone of Slessor's creative verve. His writings about his time at *Smith's* have a contradictory quality to them. Writing to Norman Lindsay in 1931 he labelled the paper a 'bloody lavatory print', saying that 'Everything in this accursed place seems to be wrong. I'm sick of trying to compromise with life in it'.[204] And yet Slessor became editor of the paper in 1935 and editor-in-chief in 1939, just a few months before he became the Official War Correspondent. It seems that though Slessor was constantly complaining about the restrictions of life as a journalist, it actually provided him a great deal of freedom which he surely recognised. He was paid to write, worked and socialised with a variety of interesting characters, and was reaching readers—usually not through his serious poetry, of course, but his name was well-known. It also allowed him to engage with themes that interested him, such as the pervasiveness of censorship in Australian society. Writing for the short-lived *Australian Outline* magazine, for example, he claimed that 'Censorship in Australia has reached such a condition of arrogance and stupidity that it can be compared only, in effect, to the holiday week-ends of the more demented Roman Emperors'.[205]

How surprising it would seem then that Slessor gladly accepted the job as Official War Correspondent in April 1940, with all his words seemingly at the mercy of the censors. For someone who had spent so much of his career poking fun at politicians and other authority figures, the move to government employment would seem on the surface a strange decision. What the job would likely provide, however, was the opportunity for Slessor to engage with a mass audience on a subject that had fascinated him since his youth: the Australian fighting man. Ian Fitchett, the acting Official War Correspondent prior to Slessor's appointment, noted that Slessor applied for the job because he had 'a poet's view of the Anzac tradition', while Clement Semmler has written that his 'diaries reveal the almost idealistic way in which Slessor went about his work in the first flush of excitement at being part of an Australian Army contingent'.[206]

Doubtless those in charge of appointing the Official correspondent recognised this eagerness to contribute to the Anzac mystique which, they believed, would add further literary weight to the tales of Australian heroics on the battlefield. Sir Henry Gullett, Minister for Information, had conceived of the role with precisely this in mind and had appointed Charles Bean, the official Australian correspondent of the First World War, to the four-member selection panel. After reviewing a shortlist of fifty journalists, they settled on Slessor. Gullett, who had been an official correspondent on the Western Front, stressed the literary merits of selecting a poet of Slessor's quality, stating that 'I feel we shall have a war correspondent

[204] Slessor papers, MS3020, box 1, folder 1, NLA.
[205] *Australian Outline*, no. 1 (1933): 1.
[206] Clement Semmler (ed.), *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor: Official Australian Correspondent 1940-1944* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1985), xxiv-xxvi.

with the Second AIF with observation and literary talent', also writing to Claude McKay that 'Slessor's work was, in my opinion, rare indeed and he should, in the position he has to fill, leave an enduring mark on Australian literature'.[207]

Smith's Weekly were quick to praise the decision of 'the former war historians Dr. C. E. W. Bean and Sir Harry Gullett', claiming that Slessor 'can write anything. To record the deeds of the Australian Army, and the chivalry or otherwise of its opponents, no other man in this continent is his equal with a sympathetic pen, and the fruitfulness of ink as matrix of thought, of human affection, of friendly kindness'.[208] Slessor was essentially hired as a literary chronicler of the new generation of Anzacs, rather than as a savvy newspaperman who would be able to 'get the story'—it simply was not required. Brigadier-General Herbert Lloyd, who took over as Director General of Army Recruiting in May 1940, noted this distinction as a major reason for Slessor's appointment. Discussing the attractiveness of Slessor's status as an accomplished poet, having recently published his most celebrated poem 'Five Bells', Lloyd remarked that:

> For those accustomed to look upon Slessor as a clever whimsical, refreshing humorist, the idea of his possessing a genius for poetry may seem, perhaps, incongruous … why stress the poetic in his make-up? … Well a moment's thought will show what an asset it is, in Australia's war correspondent of the moment, and war historian of the future … He is not to be limited, like the newspaper correspondent, whose paper demands freshness, colour, and perhaps rumour, but always a story. The paper must have a story, but the war correspondent has no need to concern himself with aught, but the picture of the troops, as he sees them … He knows that the picture he will draw of the battle discipline of Australia's sons overseas, will be the guiding model for Australia's Empire defenders of the future.[209]

Those like Lloyd, Gullett and Bean clearly had in mind the idea that Slessor could use his poetic skill to advance the Anzac narrative that Bean himself had helped to establish. His experience in journalism, having built a public profile for himself through his popular musings in the paper, made Slessor what they believed to be the perfect choice. He was not to be an out-and-out 'reporter', but rather a correspondent in the truest sense of the word, writing letters from the front to the Australian people about their fighting men. Slessor understood this responsibility, writing that 'To tell the story of those soldiers to Australia is a task which might daunt a Tacitus or Livy. I approach it with no illusions. All I can undertake is that I shall do my level best to present them as they are, and will be … [I have] a perfect freedom from the rush for news which looms at every minute over the lives of the daily newspapermen'.[210] 'The only correspondent I want to scoop', he noted elsewhere, 'is the one who makes a mistake', while the proposed history that he would subsequently (though never did) write 'will be a colorful, human story about a civilian army that civilians will want to

[207] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 179.
[208] *Smith's Weekly*, 13 Apr 1940, 4.
[209] Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 11, folder 9, NLA.
[210] *Smith's Weekly*, 6 Apr 1940, 3.

read as a story and not as a history book'.[211] As with so many war correspondents, Slessor wanted to 'tell the story', but what is clear is that he and his appointers envisaged this largely in a literary sense, rather than as a reporter seeking to uncover the 'truth', amass the facts, and 'get the story' first.

Bean proved to be Slessor's primary point of contact for the job, providing advice and a blueprint for how it might be performed. Slessor wrote of the role as if it were a valuable and sacred inheritance, stating that 'I have the enormous assistance of the work that has been so finely done before me by Sir Henry Gullett and Dr. Bean, both of whom have given me their kind and generous help'.[212] Bean seems to have been an influence whom Slessor, even if he had wanted to, could not have escaped. He was the custodian of the Official War Correspondent job, the Official Historian of Australia in the First World War and the founder of the Australian War Memorial. To Slessor, who had first engaged with the Anzac legend in his writing in 1917 as a teenager, Bean was the doyen of war writers. This had not escaped the notice of anyone with a passing interest in how the war was to be reported. The Newcastle *Sun* wrote, for example, that 'Bean is the lucid, unsensational reporter. Slessor is a poet forced by economic necessity to write for the press … politicians are usually dull fellows, but in this case they have done something amazing—they have sent a poet to see and write about war'.[213]

The interest in Slessor's new job was certainly valid. As will be explained in a later chapter, the Official War Correspondent post, which had been so firmly shaped by Bean and, to a lesser extent, Gullett, proved to be somewhat of a poisoned chalice. Far from a liberating experience which would allow Slessor to carefully work on his craft, it was rather a confusing one which grew increasingly frustrating. Slessor's aversion to authority figures and censorship led to his downfall, while the role itself was never clearly defined, despite the guiding influence of Bean, and was ultimately unfulfilling. Perhaps Slessor was miscast in the role, but this question seems to be a distillation of his entire career in journalism: never particularly comfortable with the job, and yet walking into it willingly. Despite his protestations about the profession to those like Norman Lindsay, Slessor spent his whole working life in journalism and was Vice-President of the Journalists' Club in Sydney from 1940 to 1956 and then its President until 1965. It was a writing life, but one in which Slessor walked a tightrope between what he considered high art—his poetry—and the everyday diet of scribblings for the newspaper.

[211] *Daily News*, 2 Apr 1940, 2.
[212] *Smith's Weekly*, 20 Apr 1940, 4.
[213] *Sun* (Newcastle), 2 Apr 1940, 4.

Chapter Four

Chester Wilmot

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* obituary for Chester Wilmot noted that he had 'achieved distinction both during and after World War II as a broadcaster, war historian and military commentator'.[214] The *Advertiser* echoed this, claiming that 'The promise of this brilliant and energetic young Australian was such that he could well have become a senior statesman or developed into one of the leading historians of the English-speaking world'.[215] Wilmot had been killed in the Comet air disaster of January 1954, the plane he was travelling on exploding shortly after take-off from Rome's Ciampino Airport. His reputation, as the obituaries suggest, had been forged as a result of his work as a broadcaster with the ABC and, later, the BBC during the war. Known for an almost obsessive attention to detail and desire to know the 'whole story', his later work as an historian seemed a natural career progression.

Indeed, Alan Moorehead, the famous Australian war correspondent with the British *Daily Express* and later historian, wrote that of the war correspondents he knew who showed 'exceptional promise', Wilmot 'was perhaps the best equipped to meet the peace. He ended the war with enormous gusto. At a time when most people were only too glad to forget what had happened he was consumed with interest in the strategy and the politics of the fighting'.[216] Yet Moorehead was also one of many for whom Wilmot could, at times, be a source of frustration and consternation. His determination to uncover the facts of battle and 'get the story' before his peers, along with a desire to have things done his own way, resulted in him often coming across as aggressive or petulant.

This side of his character, which Moorehead described as his 'bulldozing' nature, probably stemmed from his youth as a keen young reporter (and the son of a famous journalist and cultural figure) and university debater.[217] There were many strings to Wilmot's bow, but journalism and debating certainly seemed to be the passions that, prior to and during the war, he sought to explore to the fullest possible extent. Having been appointed a war correspondent with the ABC's mobile sound unit in the latter half of 1940, Wilmot was no doubt buoyed by the authority and prestige that the role gave him and was genuinely fascinated by the journalistic opportunity that the war presented him. This led to his becoming, at times, perhaps too deeply involved in events, rather than simply a witness and recorder of history. This was ultimately the reason for the removal of his accreditation as a war correspondent by General Thomas Blamey in New Guinea in November 1942. This followed Wilmot's vocal support of Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell, who Blamey had sacked two months prior. Having been offered a job with the BBC in May 1944, Wilmot once

[214] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Jan 1954, 3.
[215] *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 12 Jan 1954, 2.
[216] Alan Moorehead, 'Chester Wilmot: An Appreciation', *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 Jan 1954, 3.
[217] Chester Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 3, NLA.

again worked as a war correspondent following the British forces in Europe, notably landing in Normandy by glider on D-Day.

As journalist, broadcaster and historian, Wilmot viewed himself as an informer of events of historical significance to a broad audience. He wanted to do this in as simple and straightforward a manner as possible. Having been a regular voice on the Australian airwaves until late 1942, Wilmot's work as a war correspondent transported the idea and imagination of war into people's homes, shaping how they understood events that their countrymen and women were taking part in. This, it was considered by many of Wilmot's contemporaries, was a valuable contribution to Australian cultural life. Then Prime Minister Robert Menzies said at the time of Wilmot's death, for example, that Wilmot's death was a 'great loss' and that his historical work constituted 'a masterpiece of careful study, accurate examination of facts … [and written in] English of a singular clarity and distinction. He is a great loss to Australia, both as a historian and as a contributor to Australian literature'.[218] This was a summation that would doubtless have pleased Wilmot greatly.

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The Australian journalist and war correspondent Ian Morrison once referred to Chester Wilmot as 'the most disgustingly ambitious person I have ever met'.[219] Morrison had come to know Wilmot while they were both covering the war in New Guinea, by which point Wilmot was an established war correspondent for the ABC, his voice heard regularly on Australian airwaves. Wilmot had spent much of his formative pre-war years engaged in a multitude of activities and was determined to excel in all of them. But it was journalism, and in particular broadcasting, that most captured his imagination. He was conscious of the fact that he was living through a time of great historical upheaval. This consciousness of and fascination with a changing world motivated him to enter journalism and to have, quite literally, his voice heard. 'The world for which I was training myself can never exist again', he wrote in his diary soon after being appointed a war correspondent with the ABC's mobile unit, 'somehow I did not relate this impending disaster [the war] to my own life. I seem to have regarded it as something that was going to happen in the world, but not to me'. In his role as a war correspondent, he continued, 'I feel that I have a job to do which the Government thinks I can do better than other available people … My only hope now is that we shall be able to do such a good job that any possible critics will be silenced by the weight of the work that we do'.[220] Until his premature death in 1954, Wilmot dedicated much of his adult life to understanding and documenting the world's gradual slide into war in 1939 and the details of the conflict. Journalism offered him the opportunity to do this and, in line with his great personal ambition, make a name for himself in the process.

[218] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 Jan 1954, 3.
[219] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 1, NLA.
[220] Wilmot diary, 30 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.

Wilmot's entry into journalism began with his father, Reginald 'Bung' Wilmot. Bung was a famed Melbourne sports journalist whose connections and social standing opened many doors for his son. Writing predominantly about cricket and Australian rules football under the moniker 'Old Boy' for the *Argus* and *Australasian* newspapers, Bung, according to his daughter Louise, 'loved journalism and the very smell and atmosphere of a newspaper stimulated him'.[221] Alongside his lengthy career in journalism, his penetration of Melbourne's cultural life was profound. He was, alongside Robert Menzies, a long-standing member of the Savage Club and the secretary of the Melbourne Athenaeum from 1909 to 1948. The Athenaeum was one of the city's cultural centres: 'its library kept him au fait with the literary world and his special pride, the art gallery, made him associate with artists'.[222] He was also for many years the President and Secretary of the Old Melbournians society, an organisation for alumni of the Melbourne Grammar School, for whom he spent ten years compiling a record of every former student since the school's foundation. Such was his dedication to the school and his status as a true 'man of Melbourne', that the board of governors wrote to him in late 1921 stating that 'in appreciation of the very great services which you have rendered to the school … [we] ask you to accept free education at the school for your son [Chester] for as long a time as you should wish him to attend'.[223]

Bung's social status and many interests opened a world of possibilities for his only son from a young age. He 'seemed to touch every facet in the life of Melbourne' and this no doubt gave Wilmot, who was born in 1911, a great head start in life.[224] His father's journalism made a deep impression on him, inspiring both his love of sport and his fascination with words. Even during the war, Wilmot wrote to his father to compliment his journalism and the effect that it had had on him: 'As I read your column "Old Boy on Old Boys" I realise again what a wonderful flare for names and people you have—a capacity not only to know them but to be known by them. I find that I have much the same flare though it's not so well developed'.[225] Wilmot and his three sisters were, therefore, brought up in a home which valued writing, the arts and current affairs. Growing up, the Wilmot children even maintained a family newspaper called the *Boort Recorder* (named after the family home). 'There is no doubt', his sister Louise wrote later, 'that we were brought up in a world where writing was natural'.[226] Indeed, Bung's cousin was the author and journalist Mary Grant Bruce, who was, Louise continued, 'one of our childhood heroines'.[227]

The artistic and literary engagement of the family had a significant effect on Wilmot, whose school and university years were littered with a string of extracurricular activities which reflected his many interests. Chief among these was debating, which Wilmot enthusiastically pursued at university. He had won the R. E. Millear Scholarship in 1931 to study history and law at the University of Melbourne's Trinity College, and it is during these years that Wilmot

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221 Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 1, folder 1c, NLA.
222 *Ibid.*
223 Letter to R.W.E. Wilmot, 23 Nov 1921, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 1, folder 1c, NLA.
224 Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 1, folder 1c, NLA.
225 Wilmot letter to R.W.E. Wilmot, 2 Feb 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 26, NLA.
226 Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 54, folder 9, NLA.
227 *Ibid.*

began to discover and work towards realising his ambitions.[228] Perhaps the first ambition in his sights was to scale the ranks of the university debating team, but alongside this Wilmot engaged in a plethora of activities which kept his inquiring mind active. Not only did he soon become secretary of the debating team, but he was also active in student politics, secretary of the Athletics Association, and heavily involved with the student newspaper, *Farrago*. This was contrary to his father's warnings, who wrote to Wilmot with some concern that he should 'separate study from extraneous matters such as *Farrago*, debating and hurdling and not try to do all at once'.[229]

Wilmot's spurning of this advice caused his grades to suffer and ultimately led to him losing his scholarship (though he was able to continue with his studies), but he was certainly developing a reputation and leaving an impression on many of those he came into contact with. One of those was Alan Moorehead, who, while employed with the British *Daily Express* newspaper, would later work alongside Wilmot as a war correspondent. Moorehead's early impression of Wilmot was akin to Ian Morrison's: he noted in an interview after the war that Wilmot was one member of a core intellectual group that ran *Farrago* which was 'very left and ran all the politics in the university'.[230] Moorehead was 'on the fringe of the group', but 'Chester was not on the fringe at all … [We] did not consider him particularly bright, though he had a bulldozing way of being good at debating. He was considered a bit crude, hearty and bourgeois'.[231]

Wilmot had certainly developed an attachment to socialism and left wing student politics, but this was not something that he had arrived at without a great deal of thought. This is evident from his close interactions with notable members of the university's staff, particularly William Macmahon Ball, Ernest Scott and Sir Raymond Priestley. The ideas and work ethic that Wilmot developed through his regular meetings with them in these formative years influenced his intellectual development and displayed themselves in much of his later journalistic and historical work. His socialism, for example, featured prominently in much of Wilmot's private and occasional political writing and had been nurtured by Macmahon Ball's 'left-leaning' liberalism.[232]

Ball's intellectual outlook and interests shaped not only Wilmot's worldview, but also the course of his entire career. The parallels between their working lives reflect the significance of this connection, with Wilmot's interest in radio largely being attributable to the influence of Ball, who he referred to as 'one of the grandest people I have ever known'.[233] Even after he became a war correspondent, Wilmot regularly wrote to Ball, updating him on his work

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[228] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 13.
[229] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 54, folder 9, NLA.
[230] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 3, NLA.
[231] *Ibid*.
[232] Peter Ryan, 'Ball, William Macmahon (1901–1986)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, ANU, 2007.
[233] Wilmot diary, 30 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.

and asking for guidance.[234] Ball, who had been appointed as a lecturer in political philosophy at Melbourne university in 1932, had studied under Marxist thinker Harold Laski at the London School of Economics from 1929 and spent his remaining time there researching European politics. Though not a Marxist himself, Ball's interest in left-leaning politics (he had co-founded the Melbourne University Labour Club) was not something that he sought to hide from his students.[235] Rather, he sought to communicate his ideas about political science and contemporary issues in a clear and un-abstract manner. Instead of relying on grand theories and ideology, his thinking boiled down to the question of how human beings might learn 'to live better with one another'.[236] Ball's commitment to the clear communication of ideas to a broad audience led to his interest in radio broadcasting and he featured regularly on the ABC and in *The Herald* from the mid-1930s as a commentator on international affairs.

Radio by the early 1930s had become increasingly popular in Australia and academics like Ball viewed this, alongside the foundation of the ABC in July 1932, as an opportunity to educate the masses. They recognised that, despite the impact of the Depression, radio was a boom media. The number of licensed receiver sets, for example, increased by 69,000 from 1929 to 1932.[237] 'Radio clubs' were formed by devoted fans of the medium, 'drawing in hundreds of thousands of listeners'.[238] Professor Walter Murdoch of the University of Western Australia, who joined Ball among a growing cast of what we would now call 'public intellectuals' on the radio, even wrote to the ABC's vice-chairman Herbert Brookes in June 1932 that 'anyone can see that broadcasting will sooner or later take the place of literature for a vast number of people'.[239]

Those like Ball and Murdoch saw in the establishment of the ABC the chance to create a national broadcaster with the potential to be what Ball called 'the chief organ for the education … of democracy'. If 'used with wisdom and imagination', he continued, radio broadcasting could 'bridge the gulfs of ignorance and misunderstanding that now divide the nations'.[240] Ball's desire to become 'an educator and publicist for political studies' had, therefore, led to his interest in radio as a means to inform in a direct and understandable manner.[241] This was very much in line with the ABC's aims for its radio talks and news features in the 1930s, as Federal News Editor Frank Dixon sought to establish what he called

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[234] Various examples in 'Correspondence with Chester Wilmot ABC Mobile Unit', MP272/1, 4/1, NAA (Melbourne).
[235] Joel Barnes, "The Right to Read: The Book Censorship Abolition League, 1934-37", *Labour History*, no. 107 (2014): 80.
[236] Ai Kobayashi, *W. Macmahon Ball: Politics for the People* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013), 130.
[237] Alan Thomas, *Broadcast and Be Damned: The ABC's First Two Decades* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 6.
[238] Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Australian Radio Listeners and Television Viewers: Historical Perspectives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 29.
[239] Walter Murdoch letter to Herbert Brookes, 2 June 1932, cited in K. S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 30.
[240] W. Macmahon Ball, *Press, Radio and World Affairs: Australia's Outlook* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1938), 145-6.
[241] Kobayashi, *W. Macmahon Ball*, 59.

‘a truly national news service’, with radio serving as a kind of ‘spoken newspaper’.[242] Talks added colour to the straight reporting of news, and Ball proved to be one of the most capable of those called upon to do this: B. H. Molesworth, the Federal Director of Talks at the ABC from 1937, wrote in a Talks Department Report that ‘Mr Ball’s talks are bright, easy to follow and entertaining, as well as being at the same time decidedly thought provoking to all those whom it is possible to stimulate to think’.[243]

Around the time that Wilmot became seriously interested in journalism, therefore, exciting developments were happening in radio broadcasting in Australia. Ball’s dedication to education for its own sake and the clear explanation of his ideas attracted Wilmot and many other students.[244] With their mutual interest in current affairs and broadcasting, the two men became friendly and would regularly meet in Ball’s office to discuss politics and journalism.[245] Ball encouraged Wilmot’s debating, admiring the younger man’s confidence, though not without noticing his ‘eager ego-centric manner … lack of sensibility, [and] his unawareness of another’s feelings’.[246] Despite this, Ball, who later became the Department of Information’s controller of short-wave broadcasting from 1940 to 1944, saw great journalistic potential in Wilmot and, as will be discussed, was in part responsible for his later appointment as a war correspondent for the ABC. Though Wilmot was struggling with his grades at the time, therefore, he was clearly displaying a capability to transmit his ideas to others and an enthusiasm for the increasingly popular medium of radio.

This came largely in the form of his bourgeoning journalistic work and debating. Alongside Ball, the historian Ernest Scott had certainly proved a guiding influence for Wilmot’s journalistic style. Scott, who himself had been a journalist earlier in his career, also took an interest in radio broadcasting and the cultural potential of the ABC. Leading up to the formal foundation of the ABC, he had been part of a deputation of ‘leading citizens’ who presented to the Postmaster-General ‘a strong case for the adoption of the British system of broadcasting control’, arguing that the ‘educational value of broadcasting as a medium for the development of culture and public opinion’ was great.[247] Wilmot would certainly have been aware of Scott’s interest in broadcasting and the ongoing debate concerning the extent to which the ABC should be modelled on the BBC.[248] George Johnston, whose career in journalism began at the same time as Wilmot’s, later noted that ‘he liked only the history lectures under the Australian historian Professor E. Scott, a former journalist who himself had

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[242] Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio* (London: Routledge, 1988), 165.
[243] B. H. Molesworth, Talks Department Report, April 1938, ABCA, cited in Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 61.
[244] Those to have cited Ball as an inspirational teacher include Manning Clark, Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Sir Zelman Cowen. See Barnes, “The Right to Read”, 80.
[245] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 19-20.
[246] Ball’s impression of Wilmot at this time is found in the notes of Alan Wood, who had planned to write a study of Wilmot in the 1950s though never completed his work. See Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 54, folder 10, NLA.
[247] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 Jan 1932, 10.
[248] Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, 133.

no university degree but who had a restless enquiring mind and a love of original research'.[249] Through their lectures, active involvement in broadcasting and meetings with him, therefore, Scott and Ball helped to inspire Wilmot's fascination not only with journalism, but with what various commentators were now referring to as the 'newspaper of the air': radio.[250]

Wilmot sought to emulate their work ethic in his own journalism, which was now starting to develop, but was confined to the papers for the time being. Alongside his work with *Farrago*, for example, Wilmot began to write for the *Argus* in 1933 as a 'sporting casual' and its new afternoon paper, the *Star*, for whom he became the Melbourne University correspondent. Like his father, whose name no doubt assisted Wilmot as he increasingly picked up work, he began to write a regular column on public schools and amateur sport for the *Star* and was excited by the steady stream of money that resulted from this. 'The job was far too attractive for anybody of Chester's temperament to resist', George Johnston stated, 'and at that moment of acceptance his destiny was fixed'.[251] Journalism was, therefore, fast overtaking his studies in importance as Wilmot's imagination was captured by the profession's possibilities. Reflecting on this, Johnston recalled that Wilmot was 'plodding away for his degree when he could, hating it immeasurably because it *would* interfere with his newspaper work'.[252]

Alongside this, Wilmot's views were being consolidated by his involvement in student politics and debating. In his last year of studying, Wilmot's election as President of the Student Representative Council triggered a series of events which tied together many of his interests and utterly transformed his prospects and historical consciousness. This was the debating world tour that he embarked on with his friend Alan Benjamin in July 1937, which was fully funded by the National Union of Australian University Students. Wilmot had helped found the union and later immodestly claimed that 'I can't help feeling that the NUAUS is my creation'.[253] Certainly the portfolio of student roles and professional jobs in journalism that he had amassed gave Wilmot great prominence within the organisation. It came as little surprise to its members, therefore, when it was decided on the final day of their conference in 1937 that he would represent the union on this debating tour and use the opportunity not only to build relations with universities around the world, but to 'investigate student affairs abroad on behalf of the Union'.[254]

Wilmot recognised the enormity of the opportunity, not only to see the world but also to progress his career and learn more about broadcasting. He had in fact recently started to work for the ABC on a part-time basis, presenting a number of local radio 'actuality broadcasts' (a news report taped at the scene).[255] The prospect of a few months in London, which would be

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[249] George Johnston, extract from 'Portrait of Chester Wilmot', BBC, 1954, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 54, folder 9, NLA.
[250] Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, 165.
[251] *Ibid*.
[252] *Ibid*.
[253] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 29.
[254] *Ibid*, 29.
[255] *Ibid*., 27.

the final stop of the debating tour, offered the possibility of making more contacts within journalism as well as short-term broadcasting work with the organisation that the ABC had modelled itself on, the BBC. After the debates, therefore, Wilmot intended 'to stay on for a further three months to study more broadcasting work, this time with the B.B.C'.[256]

One could hardly imagine a more extraordinary environment to be learning and honing one's craft than Europe in the late 1930s. For such an ambitious early-stage journalist as Wilmot, the chance to witness international events first-hand as the world became ever more unstable was something of a golden ticket. On his return to Australia in May 1938, Alan Benjamin told the *Herald* that the trip he and Wilmot had been on over the past year was 'a debating tour punctuated by current world history'.[257] So obvious was the significance of the trip that Prime Minister Joe Lyons was persuaded to write a formal letter of introduction for the two men.[258] Starting out in the Philippines in July 1937, the itinerary included stops in Hong Kong, Japan, the USA, Canada, Britain and continental Europe. It is easy to see why the trip would have been so formative for a young journalist and why, given the variety of countries visited on the eve of war, Wilmot's observations, which he noted down in his diary, are historically significant. Indeed, one magazine reported that Wilmot's travels were 'a diverting modern odyssey' and that he was using them to establish himself as a journalist.[259] In Japan, for example, Wilmot and Benjamin made a broadcast about their experiences there, while in San Francisco Wilmot paused 'to get some knowledge of American Broadcasting methods'.[260]

Figure 4: Cartoon depicting Chester Wilmot (left) with Alan Benjamin prior to their world debating tour, "Table Talk", 8 July 1937 (Trove)

[256] *Table Talk* (Melbourne), 6 Jan 1938, 14.
[257] *Herald* (Melbourne), 30 May 1938, 14.
[258] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 29.
[259] *Table Talk* (Melbourne), 6 Jan 1938, 14.
[260] *Ibid*.

Wilmot was learning on the job, covering events of such magnitude that most established journalists could only have dreamed of. He was in a unique position, particularly for an Australian journalist, and this led to a number of important 'captures'. The most notable of these was his witnessing of a Nazi Party rally in Nuremburg in September 1938, at which he saw Adolf Hitler speak. He had made this trip after the debating contests had concluded in April, using the next few months to travel and pick up short-term jobs in broadcasting. Wilmot's diary entries concerning this event are highly evocative and give the impression of a journalist honing his craft, intending to use the material for his professional output. They are also humorous in part: the train that carried him from Frankfurt to Nuremburg on 3 September, for example, he describes as 'not so much a train as a moving crate of sweating humanity', while Nuremburg 'is of course plastered with bunting and flags and standards and swastiks and swatnots and pylons decorated with gold and green'.[261] The pressure to conform to Nazi ideology and the ramifications of this fascinated Wilmot during his visit and he discussed this at length in the diary. Nuremburg looked 'depressingly gay, depressing because this gaiety symbolises the suppression regimentation, the ghastly uniformity of action and opinion which the people are obliged to adopt', while official uniforms were so prevalent that 'the average citizen in mufti gets a feeling of nakedness, of overwhelming civilian inferiority'.[262] When Hitler addressed the crowd, meanwhile, Wilmot noted its 'grim foreboding' of war, commenting that it was 'a rather lamentable performance, for whenever Hitler, in his speech, referred to Germany's great power—her power to resist the aggressive neighbours—power to establish her rights within and without the Reich, the mob howled with delight'.[263] For somebody with a fascination for international affairs and an interest in the historical, the clear significance of the occasion and the unique insights that he was able to formulate as an eyewitness were extraordinarily exciting. Though he was repelled by what he saw in Nuremburg, Wilmot knew that the story he had captured by going there was not only newsworthy, but capable of propelling his career forward. For that reason he must have been delighted to have attended, believing that the information he had documented would always be a feather in his cap.

This certainly proved to be the case as Wilmot began working in broadcasting on a more regular basis following his travels in continental Europe. Using his diary notes as a basis, he wrote and recorded a radio broadcast called 'The Nazi Rally at Nuremburg', which was aired widely in Australia by the ABC in 1939.[264] Wilmot's prospects with the ABC could hardly have been brighter at this time. With the constant stream of globally significant events emanating from Europe and elsewhere in the late 1930s, radio news and informative talks were being broadcast at a rate hitherto unseen. In his role as the ABC's Federal News Editor, Frank Dixon simply ignored the Commission's 1938 agreement with the press that stipulated that the organisation may not use sources other than the Australian Associated Press for more than twenty-five broadcasts annually.[265] By the end of September 1938, Dixon was able to report that 'news of every important change in the overseas situation was given first through

[261] Wilmot diary, 3 Sept 1938, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 2, folder 9, NLA.
[262] *Ibid*.
[263] Wilmot diary, 6 Sept 1938, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 2, folder 9, NLA.
[264] *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 26 Aug 1939, 2.
[265] Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 66.

the national stations, in many cases ten hours before it appeared in the daily newspapers'.[266] Wilmot's unique experiences in Europe and indeed around the world, therefore, made him a desirable candidate for radio work as the medium became increasingly important.

Wilmot recognised this and sought to widen his broadcasting experience while in London with the BBC, on whom the ABC had modelled many of their educational and cultural programmes.[267] Perhaps due in part to the reputation of his father as one of Australia's leading sports journalists, he secured a job commentating on the 1938 Ashes cricket series being held in England. No doubt Wilmot was aware that the General Manager of the ABC, Charles Moses, had himself been a prominent cricket commentator earlier in the decade. After receiving a letter from Moses with advice regarding the art of sports commentary, Wilmot enthusiastically replied, noting that his ambition was to work for the ABC in radio upon his return to Australia.[268] In the meantime, he was able to secure broadcasting work with the BBC which enabled him to explore his interest in current affairs. He interviewed, for example, former British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs Leo Amery about Empire defence for a radio feature off the back of his commentary work.[269]

Upon his return to Melbourne in January 1939 after 19 months abroad, therefore, Wilmot had secured a range of broadcasting experience and started to establish a reputation as someone who had both witnessed historic events and was able to describe them for a lay audience. In this way, Wilmot was building on the interests and ideas transmitted to him by Macmahon Ball, whose own prominence in the world of radio led to his appointment as Director of short wave broadcasting in February 1940 for the recently formed Department of Information. The Department had been authorised in December 1939 to form a short wave division 'in collaboration with the ABC'.[270] In essence this meant that the ABC was to be subjected to DOI censorship and authority over the entirety of radio output.[271] It was a surprising move for Ball, who had campaigned against government censorship in the mid-1930s as a founding member of the Book Censorship Abolition League, established to 'protect the rights of readers and booksellers'.[272] Ball had, however, come to be a fervent supporter of the Australian war effort, having witnessed on a broadcasting trip to Europe with the ABC what he called 'the overwhelming horror' of Sachsenhausen concentration camp in October 1938.[273] Having seen the power of the morally corrupt state to commit such acts, Ball had come to 'qualify his instinctive pacifism with the view that armed conflict could be morally

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[266] Frank Dixon, News Department Report, Sept. 1938, cited in Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 66.
[267] Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, 133.
[268] Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 59.
[269] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 52.
[270] Edward Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World: The Department of Information 1939-1950", unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2003, 107.
[271] Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 78-80.
[272] *Herald* (Melbourne), 9 Oct 1934, cited in Barnes, "The Right to Read", 75.
[273] Cited in Tim Arnold, "W. Macmahon Ball in Sachsenhausen", *The Flinders Journal of History and Politics* 26 (2010): 93.

justified in extreme circumstances'.[274] He viewed his work with the Department of Information, therefore, as a justifiable participation in the activities of the state.

With Wilmot back in Australia and continuing to bolster his broadcasting experience with the ABC, Ball soon recruited his former student to be his assistant at the DOI.[275] In this role, Wilmot continued to give talks on ABC radio. Often these talks drew on the expertise gleaned from his experiences in Europe. One series of talks presented by Wilmot entitled 'The Truth of it is', for example, was designed to 'examine and answer the more important statements broadcast by German propagandists'.[276] With his eyewitness experiences of Nazi propaganda in 1938, Wilmot was an ideal choice to front the broadcast. His experiences were again drawn upon in another talk, entitled simply 'This Talk About Freedom', for which he was introduced as 'a young Australian graduate who has travelled extensively in Europe and America'.[277] In this he discussed Australians' idea of freedom, while also pointing out the imperfections that he, a socialist, observed of that freedom: 'economic inequalities' persisted, he argued, noting that 'we have made very little progress towards a democratic organisation of our economic life'.[278] Despite these societal problems, however, the freedom of the Australian life was worth fighting for.

By the time he was appointed as a war correspondent by the ABC, therefore, Wilmot's voice had been heard numerous times over Australian airwaves on a range of broadcasts. He was brought in as a replacement for Frank Hurley (who had been chosen by the DOI to head their overseas film unit) in the ABC's mobile sound unit. The unit would be responsible for what was an entirely new way for Australian war correspondents to report from conflict zones. Despite this introduction of radio broadcasting technology to the battlefield, Wilmot had an idea of what was expected of him, writing that:

> We are taking a mobile studio and a mobile recorder which can be carted round in a light Chev truck that we have. Because of this we will have independent transport and the unit is equipped with all mod cons so that we can go off on our own and be quite independent. The plan is that we will do broadcasts about the war—the activities of the Air and the Allied forces in the Near East—broadcasts about the country and generally tell the Australian people what the men are doing in the field and in camp and about the country in which they are working … My job will be to do the writing and to do most of the actual broadcasting.[279]

For someone so conscious of the historical, the chance to make Australian broadcasting history was an opportunity that Wilmot leapt on. Indeed, he wrote excitedly to Charles Bean (who had, of course, been both war correspondent and historian) that 'Never before have

[274] Joel Barnes, review of Ai Kobayashi, *W. Macmahon Ball*, *Melbourne Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (2013): 130.
[275] Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 79-80.
[276] "The Truth of it is" broadcast scripts, DOI, April-June 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 23, NLA.
[277] "This Talk About Freedom" broadcast script, DOI, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 23, NLA.
[278] *Ibid*.
[279] Letter to Jane Wilmot, 28 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 2, folder 15a, NLA.

correspondents come straight from the scene of action to the microphone and given to people at home their immediate impressions'.[280] Bean, who had himself been employed by the DOI in 1940 to 'provide liaison between the chiefs of staff and the press', saw in Wilmot someone who was capable of doing the job in a manner that both made use of the new medium and continued the work in the same spirit as he had done in the First World War. 'I had a special regard and affection for him since the days when he worked in the room next to mine in the Information Department … and when he set off on his memorable assignment with the A.I.F', he wrote later, 'I have never ceased to admire his courage and directness, and the ability which he showed, as soon as his quality was tried, to go straight to the heart of a situation and state it lucidly and strongly. But more than that, even, I was attracted by his sincerity in his work, and its patent honesty and uprightness. He showed his fairness and devotion to truth'.[281]

This commitment to gathering the facts and having the ability to communicate them clearly was a major reason for Wilmot's selection as a war correspondent. Thomas Bearup, Acting General Manager of the ABC from 1940 to 1943, commented later on Wilmot's 'painstaking trouble to be accurate', while Charles Moses noted that 'we felt sure that Wilmot would make a good correspondent. He had a clear and lively voice, great fluency and a first class mind, and unusual tenacity when coping with a problem'.[282] On top of this, his time spent in Europe on the eve of war gave Wilmot a unique selling point. The *ABC Weekly* magazine wrote after his appointment that Wilmot had 'been to the source of that lengthening shadow [of war]' and 'had seen enough to know that the kind of life for which he and millions of other young men had prepared themselves was about to be swept away'.[283] Wilmot had 'spent six weeks studying the innards of the B.B.C', the article continued, and had maintained 'his connections with the A.B.C'.[284] He appeared, therefore, a natural choice for the mobile sound unit, while his desire to uncover the facts of a story and understand the international situation fuelled his ambition in the role. This ambition was summed up succinctly by his wife, Edith, who sent Wilmot a telegram shortly before he travelled to the Middle East in September 1940, telling him to 'keep your finger on the pulse of the world. Australia expects'.[285]

Wilmot did, however, have some concerns about the nature of the war correspondent role. Having worked for the DOI for six months prior to his appointment by the ABC, he recognised that he would not have total control over his material output. Speaking as a true student of history, Wilmot wrote in his diary of his concerns about this, stating that the writing of propaganda was:

> bad for one who wants to maintain a critical faculty and an independent judgement and a sense of the importance of considering all evidence. When you are writing a commentary in the ordinary course of events, you must weigh up all the facts—you

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[280] Wilmot letter to Charles Bean, 10 Oct 1946, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 13, folder 10, NLA.
[281] Charles Bean letter to Jane Wilmot, 31 Jan 1954, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 13, folder 10, NLA.
[282] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 2 and box 54, folder 13, NLA.
[283] "ABC's Middle East War Reporter", *The ABC Weekly*, 14 Sept 1940.
[284] *Ibid*.
[285] Edith Wilmot telegram to Chester Wilmot, 30 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 25, NLA.

> must strive for truth … That is the standard I have tried to set myself in my lectures and broadcasts—that is the essential basis of intellectual honesty.[286]

This ambition to 'strive for truth' is, of course, the stated goal of most war correspondents. Despite the constraints of his employment, Wilmot decided that he would, so far as it was possible, search for the facts, relay them to his audience, and explain why they mattered in the grand scheme of things. This quality, as will be explained later in the thesis, was commented upon time and again by his fellow war correspondents. The British correspondent D. F. Boyd, for example, said that:

> The qualities which distinguished him were utmost observation and fidelity to detail, a far-reaching perspective view, and an ability to relate the two … Few men observed with such accuracy and retentiveness, and at the same time could maintain the long perspective view. His writing was vigorous and clear, but only concerned with his observations and conclusions. It was not in any way meretricious—it was not designed to attract; it was used only to report and explain.[287]

This interest in how current events were shaping world history underscored Wilmot's desire to uncover the facts. In this way, he was much like the Polish war correspondent and writer Ryszard Kapuściński, active in the latter half of the twentieth century, who recalled after the height of his career in the field that 'I feel a great interest in history, but not in the history in the books, but in history in the making'.[288] It was this attraction to the events which would shape his and subsequent generations' times which partly compelled Wilmot to the battlefield as a reporter. Laurence Gilliam, who worked with him after his later move from the ABC to the BBC, noted in particular how the use of radio assisted Wilmot in his ambition to synthesise news with history. Wilmot's 'uniqueness lay in the fact that he was a broadcaster as well as a historian', Gilliam noted, 'a man who saw events and yet who could write about them with a historical perspective. No one like this had appeared in broadcasting until Chester turned up … [he] was the historian, the passionate advocate … Other historians were ignorant of radio, or afraid of it. Only in Chester was this dual expertise synthesised'.[289]

Wilmot's journalism, therefore, always had one eye on the historical. Though radio was a new medium for war correspondents, Wilmot recognised that, as Tony Hill has written, it 'spoke to people and nations with the profound impact and compelling intimacy of the human voice' and had the potential to capture moments of historical significance in a uniquely personal way.[290] This borderline obsessiveness with knowing the complete story could upset those around him. Alan Moorehead recollected that when Wilmot 'was moved about anything he did not get indignant so much as assertive and aggressive', while Malcolm Frost, who worked with Wilmot at the BBC, noted that he could be 'a bit inhuman' and that 'when

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[286] Wilmot diary, 30 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.
[287] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 3, NLA.
[288] Ryszard Kapuściński interviewed by Scott Malcolmson, 9 Dec 1991, 92Y Unterberg Poetry Center and *The Paris Review*. Available at < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvj-pV_6_10&t=2791s>. Accessed 1 Aug 2022.
[289] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 3, NLA.
[290] Hill, *Voices from the Air*, 1.

things went wrong, and he did not get the kind of programme or job done as he wanted, he would get into a fury of frustration'.[291] This frustration partly stemmed from Wilmot's ambition to capture and record a first draft of history through his journalistic work, as well as from his sizeable ego. He certainly had great personal ambition and had carefully mapped out a career path for himself in the profession throughout much of the 1930s. In doing this, he had modelled himself to some extent on Macmahon Ball, who had himself charted a course through the new world of radio broadcasting for intellectual commentators. As a war correspondent, Wilmot would also be required to find a way of using the radio to convey information that he deemed significant. With his attention for detail and eye for the historical, it is little surprise that Wilmot went on to write two significant history books—*Tobruk, 1941* (1945) and *The Struggle for Europe* (1952)—and was offered the opportunity shortly before his death to author a volume of the *Official History*.

[291] Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folders 3 and 2, NLA.

Chapter Five

Damien Parer and George Silk

Damien Parer and George Silk are included here in the same chapter because of their similar artistic interests and because of their close cooperation during the war from 1940 to 1943. As Official Photographer and Assistant Official Photographer respectively, both were members of the Department of Information's photographic and film unit, which in the Middle East, North Africa and Greece was comprised of the veteran photographer Captain Frank Hurley as the group's leader, Ron Maslyn Williams as scriptwriter and producer, and Alan Anderson as sound engineer.[292] This group will be treated as a case study in chapter six.

Parer and Silk were engaged in a relatively new form of war correspondent work: photojournalism. Though photographers had, of course, been present in previous wars (Hurley had been the official Australian photographer of the First World War), photojournalism as a standard branch of journalism had emerged in the inter-war period following the growth and popularity of new picture magazines in Europe and North America.[293] Parer and Silk rigorously collected these publications when they were made available in Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, along with movie newsreels, these publications 'became so pervasive a part of everyday culture in so many parts of the world between the wars (and such an indispensable part of government propaganda) that the use of photographs in the press increasingly became routine and expected'.[294]

War photography is caught between two worlds. On the one hand, there is the duty of the photographer to produce an accurate depiction of events as they actually happened. The camera is expected to capture the moment for posterity, visually documenting the experience and fallout of war. On the other hand, photography is an artform and photographers are expected to 'tell a story' through their work, which itself is normally subject to censorship. As government employees until 1943, Parer and Silk were expected to document the reality of war while simultaneously using their artistic vision to provide propaganda material. Both men felt stifled by this dynamic at times and, as will be discussed later, ultimately left government employment in search of greater artistic liberty. The uniqueness of this role, particularly given the new potential of photojournalism after the medium's growth in the inter-war period, meant that it was a crucial factor in how the war was configured in the Australian imagination. As the semiotician Umberto Eco has written:

> The vicissitudes of our century have been summed up in a few exemplary photographs that have proved epoch-making: the unruly crowd pouring into the

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[292] 'Photographic Units of the Department of Information in the Middle East', *Australasian Photo-Review* 48, no. 3 (Mar 1941): 103.
[293] Michael Griffin, "The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism", in *Picturing the Past: Media, History and Photography*, eds. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 123.
[294] *Ibid.*, 124.

> square during the "ten days that shook the world"; Robert Capa's dying *miliciano*; the marines planting the flag on Iwo Jima … Each of these images has become a myth and has condensed numerous speeches. It has surpassed the individual circumstance that produced it; it no longer speaks of that single character or of those characters, but expresses concepts.[295]

The pictures captured by those like Parer and Silk, therefore, could have a significant impact on 'the construction of a collective memory' in Australia and have a place 'as historical markers in the culture of [Australian] society'.[296] This will be discussed in greater depth in chapter eight, but it is important to note at the outset the very particular roles that Parer and Silk would have as war correspondents and the cultural and artistic significance of their work. Both Parer and Silk thought of themselves as artists who had a particular interest in the documentary form, which had been first pioneered in the Soviet Union and Germany in the 1920s, before being developed by those like the British documentary maker John Grierson, of whom both men were keen followers.[297]

As the only war correspondent in this thesis killed in the war, Parer is a unique subject. With White, Johnston, Slessor, Wilmot and Silk, there are a number of post-war sources such as interviews, writings and letters to help us understand what they thought about their roles and the characters they met during the war and the way that they subsequently assessed this; with Parer there is simply the silence of the grave. He had no opportunity for self-reflection on his work and its significance or the chance to produce further work after the war. He is frozen in time as a man with an artistic vision that he sought to apply to the Australian fighting man—he spent the 1930s forming an understanding and concept of photography and motion camerawork, with the war serving as the crucible for realising his ambitions. His early death and the risks he took to capture his pictures has cemented him in the canon of Anzac mythology. As a devout Catholic, his legend has also been seized upon by some within the Australian Catholic church, viewing him as 'a unique kind of Christian crusader'.[298] The Catholic writer Niall Brennan's biography of Parer fits this description and, in the words of Maslyn Williams, contains examples of 'pure gobbledygook'.[299] As such there has been a tendency to mythologise Parer which even the more scholarly writings, such as Neil McDonald's biography, have fallen into.

In the case of Silk, little has been written which specifically documents his experiences during the war and attempts to grapple with his perception of his work as a war correspondent.[300] Yet Silk's photographs have also helped to form the fabric of the Australian imagination of the country's role in the Second World War, particularly his image of the blinded Australian serviceman being escorted by a New Guinea native. Having fallen out

[295] Umberto Eco, "A Photograph", in *Travels in Hyperreality*, ed. Umberto Eco, trans. William Weaver (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 216.
[296] Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennen, 'Introduction', in *Picturing the Past*, eds. Brennen and Hardt, 2.
[297] *Ibid.*, 2.
[298] Ron Maslyn Williams, "My Friend Parer", *Eureka Street* 4, no. 9 (1994): 10.
[299] *Ibid.*, 10; Brennan, *Damien Parer: Cameraman*.
[300] One study which collects and briefly analyses some of Silk's war photographs is McDonald and Brune, *200 Shots*.

with the Department of Information, he joined *Life* magazine in 1943, covering the war in Europe before later capturing the first photographs of Nagasaki after the dropping of the atomic bomb in August 1945. As one of the publications that had no doubt fuelled Silk's initial desire to enter the field of photography, he remained with the publication until it closed in December 1972. He died in Connecticut in October 2004.

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Attached to the front of a file containing correspondence between Ron Maslyn Williams and Neil McDonald is a telling note. During his research for a biography about Damien Parer, McDonald had contacted Williams, who was one of Parer's best friends and himself a successful documentary maker, numerous times. The stream of correspondence had clearly started to rile Williams, who says in the note that McDonald 'continued to ring, write and visit me to pursue this subject for the next several years during which period I was going through a pretty stressful time both in health and work matters and found his hours of questioning and taping exhausting. Eventually, when he began sending lengthy questionnaires while I was in hospital I had to call a halt'.[301] Beyond this frustration with McDonald's relentlessness, however, Williams makes an important observation. 'McDonald had not grasped the fact that Parer was an *artist*', Williams writes, 'who was called upon to provide material for a non-artistic purpose (news and propaganda)'.[302]

McDonald's subsequent biography races towards his real area of interest, which is Parer's war years and the resulting tales of daring and adventure—a portrait of the man with the camera on the battlefield.[303] But Williams's criticism is valid because Parer *thought* of himself as an artist, having spent much of the 1930s familiarising himself with contemporary photographic and cinematographic trends and theory. The extent to which Parer was successful in the pursuit of art is debatable—he was never what we might think of as an 'intellectual'—but the intent to produce work with an artistic 'vision' had certainly motivated him prior to his appointment as an official war photographer. The war, therefore, presented him with an extraordinary opportunity to produce work that would build on his artistic ideas and rampant Australian nationalism. The war as opportunity for artistic expression applied equally to George Silk, who worked alongside Parer in the Middle East, North Africa and New Guinea as an official war photographer. Silk, who was born and raised in New Zealand, had equally strong feelings about photography and the two became close friends while they worked together. Indeed, Silk described Parer as 'just like a twin brother' who shared a 'similar crusade in life'.[304] The central issue concerning Silk and Parer's war work, therefore, seems to be how the two men reconciled their need for artistic expression with the demands of their jobs as war correspondents.

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[301] Ron Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 37, folder unnumbered, NLA.
[302] *Ibid*.
[303] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*.
[304] George Silk interviewed by Neil McDonald, 21 Dec 1984, S00379, AWM.

Damien Parer

The career progression of both men in the 1930s, as well as contemporary photographic trends and movements, are key to understanding this. Both Parer and Silk came to photography early. For Parer, whose staunch Catholic faith had been instilled in him by his Spanish father and Irish Australian mother, it was the mechanics of cameras that first caught his attention. In an interview with Chester Wilmot during the war, Parer discussed his years as a boarder at the Roman Catholic St Stanislaus College in Bathurst (where he was sent in 1923), noting that his discovery of the *Australian Photographic Review* led to his fascination with 'the magnificent cameras' he saw in its pages and 'all the technical talk that went with them … I knew nothing then about telephoto lenses, filters and couples range finders, but they seemed to open up a new world to me'.[305]

Parer's world until then had been somewhat limited and was shaped by his devout Catholic upbringing, which had a lasting profound effect on his outlook. Born in 1912, his faith had been drummed into him by his parents and during his years of schooling, first at St Stanislaus and then, from 1929 until 1930, at the Irish Catholic St Kevin's College in Melbourne, where he was again a border. The rather insular life of a school boarder during these years contributed to Parer's interest in cameras as tools which could open up fascinating new worlds and assist him in the artistic expression of his faith. This remained a fundamental aspect of his interest in photography. As his brother Stan later noted, Parer 'was deeply spiritual in his outlook both on life and art. He was not merely a Catholic and a photographer but a Catholic photographer filled with the ambition of using his art in the cause of the Apostolate'.[306] Those who knew Parer regularly referred to the depth of his faith as a motivator for his work. Maslyn Williams, for example, wrote that Parer's 'faith was the unquestioning, accepting faith of a child but he lived that faith with the burning intensity of a zealot. Before everything he was a Catholic—next he was an artist with an artist's belief in beauty and truth—then he was an Australian'.[307]

It is probably true to say that Parer's intense Australianness, which resulted in his nationalist filmmaking prior to and during the war, was partly borne of his Catholicism. This phenomenon of faith inspiring nationalism was part of a wider trend within the Catholic church in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The attitudes of the Irish-Australian community at this time largely mapped onto the 'Australia first' nationalism of the Labor Party and was generally critical of imperial policy.[308] During and immediately after the First World War, for example, a refusal to display the Union Flag at St. Patrick's Day rallies was often coupled with an insistence on flying the Australian flag, while Catholic veterans featured prominently in the parades to 'disprove accusations of Catholic Irish-

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[305] Damien Parer 'Guest of Honour' interview with Chester Wilmot, c. late 1943, Damien Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.

[306] Stan A. Parer, "Memories of my Brother Damien", 7 Jul 1952: available at <https://parerhistory.wordpress.com/2018/04/05/memories-of-my-brother-damien/>. Accessed 3 February 2022.

[307] Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 65A, NLA.

[308] Elizabeth Malcolm and Diane Hall, *A New History of the Irish in Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018), 300-303.

Australian "shirking" or disloyalty'.[309] Irish Catholics had, after all, 'enlisted in the AIF in numbers comparable to their proportion in the total population' during the first eighteen months of the war.[310] Parer's later involvement in the Campion Society, a Catholic social action group which he joined in the mid-1930s, reflected a similar attitude. The Campions were 'appalled by the appeasement policies of the British government' and actively campaigned against fascism, seeking to promote their faith while engaging in social militancy.[311] With his burgeoning interest in photography from his schooldays, therefore, Parer no doubt believed that the artform provided him with a valuable means of self-expression and of engaging in social action that was true to his core values rooted in Catholicism and Australian nationalism.

When he left school at the age of seventeen in 1930, therefore, Parer was determined to make his career in photography. No doubt that through his early interest in cameras and appreciation for their artistic potential, Parer shared at this time a similar sentiment as the famous Australian photographer Max Dupain, who he later worked for and become close to. In an interview in 1937, for example, Dupain discussed 'the breath-taking possibilities of this new machine. I believe in the creative effort of generations of artistic thought … The camera could revolutionise the world's culture! With its feet once established in the soil of tradition, its head will look after itself in the clouds of futurity'.[312] As the teenaged Parer, in his words, 'trudged around the streets of Melbourne from one photographer to another' looking for work in 1930, a similar belief that cameras represented an exciting artistic medium imbued with a multitude of possibilities was at the forefront of his mind.[313] Though at first he found that 'there were no jobs in that depression year', Parer was eventually 'taken on as an apprentice by a society photographer in Collins Street'.[314] This photographer was Arthur Dickinson, a friend of the famous Pictorialist photographer Jack Cato.[315] Parer served his apprenticeship under Dickinson for the next three years, photographing what he later summed up as 'brides, babies and family groups' both in the studio and in people's homes.[316]

Though he greatly developed his craft during this time, Parer felt restricted by the studio environment.[317] This was because from the early 1930s he had started to deepen his knowledge of photographic trends and theory by reading and watching a wide variety of materials. His notebook from this period documents his shift in focus from still photography to a fascination with the moving image. It consists of extensive note-taking regarding the filmic ideas of numerous American and European directors and cinematographers. Parer

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[309] *Ibid.*, 326-7.
[310] Neville Meaney, "Australian Irish Catholics and Britishness: The Problem of British 'Loyalty' and 'Identity' from the Conscription Crisis to the end of the Anglo-Irish War", *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 34 (2013): 31.
[311] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 35-6.
[312] Max Dupain, cited in Isobel Crombie, *Body Culture: Max Dupain, Photography and Australian Culture, 1919-1939* (Melbourne: Peleus Press in association with the National Gallery of Victoria, 2004), 11.
[313] Parer 'Guest of Honour' interview with Wilmot, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
[314] *Ibid*.
[315] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 9-10.
[316] Parer, 'Guest of Honour' interview with Wilmot, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
[317] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 10.

found these wherever he could, such as in books dedicated to film theory and in magazines like *American Cinematographer* and the British *Cinema Quarterly*, which ran from 1932 to 1935. John Hetherington, who worked as a war correspondent with the AIF alongside Parer in the Middle East and Greece, later remarked on this 'penetrating study of the art and craft of photography', writing that Parer:

> read every book on the subject that he could find, analysing, and often challenging, the theories and conclusions of recognized experts. At the end of his life he owned a large collection of such books; nearly every page of every book bore evidence of the relentless study he had given it—lines under-scored, cross-references noted, comments pencilled in the margin.[318]

Through these publications, Parer began to refine his understanding of how film cameras could be used to their artistic potential, taking extensive notes from the material that he read. Judging by the sheer number of quotations that he copied out, one can clearly see the building blocks of how Parer came to view the film medium, which he later called 'the greatest persuasive medium of the present time'.[319] In a section of the notebook titled 'The Function of Photography: Statements by different men on this subject', for example, Parer displays an obsession with the question of how to capture artistic truth and beauty through film. The construction of a story which conveyed real-world values seemed to him to be an important method of achieving this. Quoting the German art and film theorist Rudolf Arnheim, for example, he writes that:

> The film artist … possesses the power to determine very largely what black and white values the objects he photographs shall have when projected on the screen … This is one of the most important aesthetic possibilities of film. The primitive but always effective symbolism of light versus darkness, white purity versus black evil, the opposition between gloom and radiance, is inexhaustible.[320]

In an article from *Cinema Quarterly* entitled 'The Function of the Cameraman' by the German cinematographer Curt Courant, Parer quotes Courant's belief that 'photography should enforce, not distract from, the thematic content. Selfish photography is like over acting. The beauty of the camerawork must be absolutely dissolved with the mood of the story'. For Courant, the mechanics of film cameras enabled its user to produce art:

> A camera is a machine, a vehicle for the film; the lens is a piece of dead glass; a lamp is a lamp; the film itself is a chemical product … The man who can visualize a scene in terms of these dead things, and from them create a work of living beauty, he is a creative artist.[321]

These ideas stuck with Parer and encouraged him in his shift towards motion photography. Indeed, the documentary maker John Heyer, who got to know Parer well in the mid-1930s,

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[318] John Hetherington, *Australians: Nine Profiles* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1960), 170.
[319] Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
[320] *Ibid*.
[321] *Ibid*.

recalled that he was 'one of the very few who realised the importance of composition in relation to content, not only in the shot itself, but in the preceding shot and the after shot'.[322] His voracious reading and movie-going had enabled Parer to gain an understanding of how cinematography worked and what he hoped to achieve with the camera before he had even established himself in the field. Maslyn Williams, who first met Parer in 1935, recalled that 'with the movie-camera he was an artist to his fingertips with a skill and sensitivity that derived from an intensive philosophical study of the anatomy and grammar of art in all its forms'.[323] It was not simply the world of cinema and film theory that was informing Parer's conception of what the camera was capable of. The same notebook demonstrates his interest in literature, particularly poetry. For Parer, the word 'poetry' could be applied to all manner of artforms. This is evident from the quotations he compiled from numerous poets which, to his mind, suggested that his work could be considered a form of poetical expression. He quotes the Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney, for example, who wrote that 'It is not rhyming or versing that maketh a poet', as well as John Dryden's statement that 'a poet is a maker'.[324] He cites also Samuel Taylor Coleridge's definition of poetry as the 'art of apprehending and interpreting ideas by the faculty of imagination: the art of idealising in thought and expression'.[325] It was no great leap, therefore, for Parer to stretch this understanding of what it was to be a poet to suit himself and his own circumstances. Film provided a means of expressing his thoughts, values and creativity through a medium that was still relatively new.

Parer was excited by those who used their artform to create something that he believed to be genuinely new. One of these artists was the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who Parer described as 'capable of being surprisingly true to himself'.[326] Alongside his poetry, Hopkins was also a devout Catholic, becoming a Jesuit priest in the mid-1860s. Perhaps seeing something of himself and his own values in Hopkins, Parer read all that he could find of Hopkins's work and compiled a short biography of him in his notebook drawn from various sources. Writing about Hopkins's return to writing poetry after a seven-year break from 1868, Parer noted that 'the effect was of the sudden release like the bursting of a dam, a discharge, something new in the history of literature—a richness, a violence, a fierce majesty'.[327] 'When things are stirred into action', he continued, 'they are 1000 times more beautiful'.[328] This was a statement that would have even more veracity for Parer when he became a war cameraman, but what is significant about this is his great regard for anything he considered artistically 'new' or 'genuine'. These were qualities that he sought to convey in his own work from the mid-1930s. As Maslyn Williams later wrote about him:

> Like any genuine artist he set out to give form and coherence to his own beliefs in a way that would make other people see the validity of what he believed. His work was not instinctual. He was no unlettered genius. The strength of his work was that it had a

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[322] John Heyer, cited in McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 14-15.
[323] Maslyn Williams notes on second draft concerning proposed screenplay by John Duigan on the life on Damien Parer, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 37, folder unnumbered, NLA.
[324] Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
[325] *Ibid.*
[326] *Ibid.*
[327] *Ibid.*
[328] *Ibid.*

single purpose which was to proclaim a truth—*or what he considered to be a truth* [emphasis added].[329]

There was a sense, therefore, that Parer's artistic mission (which he believed to be one of proclaiming truth) was a form of proselytisation, designed to convert people to his heightened form of Catholic-inspired nationalism. It was this desire to 'proclaim a truth' and to create something new and meaningful that attracted Parer to the documentary form. The most significant figure for Parer, and indeed George Silk, in this regard was the British documentary maker John Grierson, who was the first to coin the term 'documentary' in 1926. By the time Max Dupain met Parer in the late 1930s, he recalled that Parer 'was obsessed with motion picture photography' and that his 'favourite quote was Grierson's assessment of the photographic document: The creative treatment of actuality'.[330] Though Grierson's work was little known in Australia prior to the Second World War, Parer was an early follower of his approach to documentary film and 'introduced many of his contemporaries … to the ideas of the movement'.[331] Grierson's writing was regularly published by *Cinema Quarterly* and, as a regular reader of such publications, Parer was exposed to his ideas from very early on. Grierson's approach to documentary sought to shed new light on its subject by presenting the reality of situations, rather than fictional scenarios. 'The documentary idea', he wrote:

> demands no more than that the affairs of our time shall be brought to the screen in any fashion which strikes the imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was. At one level, the vision may be journalistic; at another, it may rise to poetry and drama. At another level again, its aesthetic quality may lie in the mere lucidity of its exposition.[332]

For someone so concerned with the poetic and genuine expression of ideas and values as Parer, Grierson's conception of documentary provided sustenance for his own artistic ambitions. By the mid-1930s and having completed his photographic apprenticeship, these ambitions were starting to gain some fruition as Parer increasingly picked up work in film studios and widened his artistic social circles. The first major milestone in this regard was an offer in 1934 to work as an assistant cameraman on Charles Chauvel's upcoming epic, *Heritage* (1935). Chauvel, who had partially learnt his trade in Hollywood in the early 1920s, was already an established figure of Australian cinema, having directed films like *Moth of Moonbi* (1926), *Greenhide* (1926) and *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933). Chauvel had grown up in a wealthy land-owning family in rural Queensland and sought to communicate his love of Australia through his films. As such, a Chauvel picture was often 'imbued with an epic, visionary nationalism' which celebrated 'the core values from which he emerged … [and

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[329] Maslyn Williams notes on second draft concerning proposed screenplay by John Duigan on the life on Damien Parer, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 37, folder unnumbered, NLA.
[330] Max Dupain, *Max Dupain's Australia* (Melbourne: Viking, 1986), 12.
[331] Gael Newton, *Silver and Grey: Fifty Years of Australian Photography 1900-1950* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), n.p.; see also Andrew Pike, "Documentary Traditions Before Grierson: The Case of Frank Hurley" in *The Documentary Film in Australia*, eds. Ross Lansell and Peter Beilby (Melbourne: Cinema Papers in association with Film Victoria, 1982), 137.
[332] John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (first published 1946), cited in Richard Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 85.

sought to] capture the Australian spirit'.[333] Beginning in the early 1930s, Australian films increasingly sought to capture the essence of the bush mythology and so add filmic substance to the work of nationalist writers associated with the *Bulletin* school of the late-nineteenth century like Henry Lawson.[334] This then fed into the idea of the Anzac soldier being the natural result of the bush ethos, a conception that was increasingly dramatised by Australian cinema in the 1930s and 40s (and which has obvious significance for Parer's later work).[335] Chauvel was the central figure in pushing Australian cinema in this direction, declaring that 'Australian motion picture makers have a duty to depict Australia as a land with a magnificent heritage'.[336] As Ken G. Hall, another pioneering figure of Australian cinema, later noted, Chauvel 'did not make films merely for the pecuniary profit that he himself might expect; he made them because he had a burning desire to show the country he loved so well to the rest of the world'.[337]

Heritage encapsulated Chauvel's romantic vision of the nation, depicting the heroic struggles of various pioneering families. The film had, Chauvel claimed, 'almost everything that Australia can offer'.[338] Alongside the experience of working with renowned cameramen Arthur and Tasman Higgins, who assisted him with the development of his craft, Parer's work on *Heritage* no doubt fuelled his desire to produce work with an artistic vision that communicated real values—love of country being the central concern in this instance. Chauvel's influence on Parer, who later worked on his Anzac-inspired *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (which was, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'based on [Bean's] official war history') was profound.[339] His work for Chauvel had enabled him to find a job as a cinematographer at the National Studios in Sydney. Chauvel's influence is most noticeable in two short films entitled *This Place Australia*, released in 1939, for which Parer was director of photography. A collaboration between Parer and two other filmmakers (George Hughes and Stan Tolhurst), *This Place Australia* was a celebration of 'the life and work of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson', committing their poetry to film and showcasing the Australian landscape in the process.[340] Reviewing the films, one critic wrote that 'The star of the production is cameraman Damien Parer, whose work is as breathtakingly lovely as anything that ever came out of Hollywood'.[341] Indeed, Parer, having by that time worked on a number of Australia-centric films like *The Flying Doctor* and *Rangle River* (both 1936), was starting to be written about in a way that was not dissimilar from Chauvel. One newspaper, for example, commented that:

> The camera art of Damien Parer reveals a striking maturity and simplicity, combined with an intangible note of mysticism … he is at his best when interpreting the great

[333] Stuart Cunningham, *Featuring Australia: The Cinema of Charles Chauvel* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 1-2.
[334] Bruce Molloy, *Before the Interval: Australian Mythology and Feature Films, 1930-1960* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1990), 22.
[335] *Ibid.*, 24.
[336] Cited in Molloy, *Before the Interval*, 107.
[337] Cited in Michael Pate, introduction to Susanne Chauvel Carlsson, *Charles & Elsa Chauvel: Movie Pioneers* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1989), ix.
[338] Cited in Cunningham, *Featuring Australia*, 101.
[339] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Mar 1940, 11.
[340] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 36.
[341] Williams, "My Friend Parer", 15.

wealth of photogenic material of the Australian landscapes … He interprets them as only an artist with an intense love and appreciation of Australia could do … Damien Parer is in the tradition of Henry Lawson and the Australian poets. His camera is his pen, his film his paper, and the fierce, penetrating Australian light the ink with which he creates his pictures. His essentially poetic inspiration is manifest in his most accomplished work, a ten-minute short, entitled, *This Place Australia*.[342]

Given Parer's interest in the poetic and desire to be viewed as a kind of poet with an artistic vision, he could hardly have wished for a more pleasing assessment of his work. With all his study of photographic, film and documentary theory, the artist in Parer had been carefully emerging since the end of his apprenticeship with Arthur Dickinson and had been aided by numerous significant individuals like Chauvel. This widening of his social circles resulted in Parer meeting like-minded individuals who shared his interest in creating new, meaningful art. These individuals included Maslyn Williams, who Parer first met in 1935 while the two were working at National Studios.[343] Williams shared Parer's enthusiasm for film and was equally well-read in the latest relevant literature. The two were, Williams later recalled, 'obsessively filled with the idea that together [we] would aim to make great Australian films, with deeply meaningful themes, using classically developed techniques'.[344]

Due to the broadening of his social circles and growing reputation, Parer was able to find work in photography even when he struggled to gain employment in the film industry. When he was let go by National Studios in 1936 due to the company's financial difficulties, for example, Parer was forced to return to freelance photographic work. By October 1938, however, he had managed to find employment at Max Dupain's Bond Street studio in Sydney.[345] The studio, which Dupain ran with his then wife and fellow photographer Olive Cotton, had by the mid-1930s established a reputation as 'the epicentre of art photography in Australia' and was a focal point of the Sydney photography scene.[346] It was a place for accomplished photographers from different generations to meet and discuss their work in a like-minded environment. Older photographers who had made their name during the height of the romantic Pictorialist period in Australian photography like Harold Cazneaux and Cecil Bostock attended, while those at the forefront of the new Modernist style like Dupain and Laurence Le Guay were central characters. Dupain's studio was, in short, a microcosm of Australian art photography from the late nineteenth-century to the present day.

Though Parer was, of course, now more interested in motion camerawork, there could hardly have been a more suitable place for him to refine his artistic understanding of how

[342] *Advocate* (Melbourne), 16 May 1940, 23.
[343] Ross Gibson and Deane Williams, "The Maslyn Williams Network", *Critical Arts* 31, no. 5 (2017): 205.
[344] Williams letter to Dick Mason and Tony Morphett regarding proposed film about Damien Parer, 1979, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 61, NLA.
[345] Damien Parer 'Declaration of Personal Antecedents and Identity of Press Representatives Accompanying the Military and/or Air Forces in the Field', item ID: 4054834, series number: B4717, NAA (Melbourne).
[346] Anne Maxwell and Lucy Van, "Modernist Photography and Women's Social Networks: The Case of Olive Cotton and Margaret Michaelis", *History of Photography* 41, no. 3 (2017): 249.

photography could be conducted. As Maslyn Williams later wrote, his time at the Dupain studio 'opened Parer's eyes to the "art" of photography and visual presentation. At the same time Parer went through an intensive period of reading art and film books far into the night, making masses of annotations'.[347] For the first time, Parer found himself in a work environment in which he was surrounded by individuals who were doing exactly the same thing. Dupain, for example, later recounted how international publications like the German photography magazine *Das Deutsche Lichtbild* and the British annual *Modern Photography* were passed around the studio 'to see what they were thinking on the other side of the world'.[348] The range of photographers and styles that the group became familiar with through these publications was truly eclectic—Dupain wrote of the significance of:

> the discovery of [American surrealist photographer] Man Ray and the radical thinking of his Dada confederates … the new work being done overseas and its arrival on our doorstep in magazine form—photographic revelations by Horst, Muncaszi, George Hoyningen-Huene, Toni Frizell, de Meyer, Louise Dahl Wolf, Bill Brandt, Brassai, the adventurous Margaret Burke White and hordes of others. This was all shared by the interesting people I had around me.[349]

It is clear that Parer was not only learning from this environment, soaking up ideas and practical knowledge like a sponge, but also an active collaborator in the artistic life of the studio. He was, for example, a founding member of the Contemporary Camera Groupe in November 1938 alongside Dupain, Cotton, Le Guay, Cazneaux and other frequenters of the studio. Believing that other groups like the Photographic Society of NSW had not embraced modern techniques and ideas, the members wrote that 'We have built this little unit in order to strengthen the liaison between photography and the other arts. We hate the cliché, and would drive a wedge between stagnant orthodoxy and original thought of the living moment'.[350] The Contemporary Camera Groupe staged their own exhibition in Sydney soon after their formation, displaying works which celebrated the coming of 'Modernist' photography in Australia and which were inspired by their intimate familiarity with international trends and movements. While Parer was still primarily concerned with film and, in particular, documentary making, he was at this time very much under the wing of Dupain. Indeed, he hyperbolically wrote that 'Maxie is the only photographer in the country worth a cracker … the only one who thinks, the only one who has perception and selective power'.[351] How surprising, one would think, given that he worked so closely alongside other photographers in the founding of the Groupe, but, as will be discussed later in the thesis, Parer was always prone to exaggeration.

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[347] Williams letter to Dick Mason and Tony Morphett regarding proposed film about Damien Parer, 1979, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 61, NLA.
[348] Max Dupain, cited in Maxwell and Van, "Modernist Photography and Women's Social Networks", 249.
[349] Dupain, *Max Dupain's Australia*, 12.
[350] Introduction, *Exhibition of Photographic Studies by Contemporary Camera Groupe*, Sydney, David Jones' Exhibition Gallery, 1938, cited in Helen Ennis and Olive Cotton, *Olive Cotton: Photographer* (Canberra: NLA, 1995), 8.
[351] Damien Parer letter to Marie Cotter, 12 Aug 1940, Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/4, SLNSW.

Figure 5: Damien Parer during his time at the Max Dupain studio, 1938 (Olive Cotton, AWM)

Though Parer's own voice for much of the 1930s is hidden from the archive, it is hard not to think that Dupain and those around him greatly influenced his conception of how the camera might be used as a creative tool. Like Chauvel, Dupain possessed a deep love of Australia that he sought to communicate through his camera. 'I have a very specific devotion to my country', he later said, noting that 'I find that my whole life, if it's going to be of any consequence in photography, has to be devoted to that place where I have been born and reared, and worked, thought, philosophized and made pictures to the best of my ability'.[352] Leading up to the war, therefore, Parer had a deep knowledge of photography and an understanding of what he might like to present through his own work. The nationalism of Chauvel and Dupain had clearly ignited his own intense love of his country—hence his creation of *This Place Australia* in 1939—but as yet he lacked a suitable project big enough and worthy enough to implement the ideas that he had begun to form through the 1930s. He had not had the opportunity to put all of his effort into one creative endeavour over a prolonged period of time. 'The war', Dupain later wrote, 'with tragic irony, gave him his great opportunity'.[353]

George Silk

On the eve of his appointment as an official war photographer, therefore, Parer had begun to make a name for himself and was familiar, both socially and professionally, with some of Australia's leading photographers and filmmakers. George Silk, on the other hand, had lived a sheltered life in his native New Zealand at this time, but had developed a very similar artistic interest to Parer. Having grown up in Auckland, Silk left school at the age of fourteen in 1930 with little idea of what he wanted to do next. His father was a musician: 'he rode a bicycle around the gravel roads of the North Island', Silk recalled, 'selling musical

[352] Max Dupain interviewed by Helen Ennis in Ennis, *Max Dupain: Photographs* (Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1991), 12-13.
[353] Dupain, *Max Dupain's Australia*, 12.

instruments, pianos and organs to the rich farmers'.[354] This brought in a healthy sum of money, 'but he lost it all in the Depression'.[355] Bored and struggling at school, Silk now felt obliged to go out and earn an income. This resulted in him finding work at a dairy farm in Taranaki for two years, before returning to Auckland to work in a hardware shop.[356] Silk always had, however, a taste for adventure and the great outdoors: he 'dreamed of going to the Poles and of climbing Mount Everest', and later noted that his early photographs were all of his favourite activities.[357] These included 'sail-boat racing and trout fishing and skiing and mountain climbing, and I became the official photographer of the local motorcycle club'.[358]

At this time, photography was a way for Silk to experience his hobbies more deeply and capture the moments that brought him joy. After borrowing his sister's box camera at the age of sixteen, he became fascinated with the process of photography: 'the first time I actually took a negative and put it in an enlarger and made a print and saw it coming up in the soup', he recalled, 'I couldn't believe it. It opened a whole world to me. The next thing, I was out taking pictures just every second, and I took pictures of the things that I love to do'.[359] Having presented some of his pictures to D.G. Begg at his camera shop in Auckland, Silk was offered a job there developing and printing photographs. Begg, who was highly complimentary of Silk's work (and later supplied him with a reference upon his application for a job as a war photographer), allowed him to borrow cameras and encouraged him to experiment.[360] Having performed poorly at school, Begg's enthusiasm for the young photographer gave Silk a confidence in his abilities that had been lacking, later noting that 'I am very affected by people who admire my work. The ego thing immediately starts working'.[361] This need for reassurance in his work stemmed from an insecurity that remained with Silk for the entirety of his life. John Loengard, who worked closely with Silk at *Life* magazine for close to three decades after the war, recalled that 'George had a great ego … [but] he was always uncertain … If I used a word to describe George professionally, I'd use the word insecure'.[362] As will be discussed in later chapters, this combination of ego and insecurity fuelled much of Silk's work and actions during the war. Having had little idea of what he wanted to do with his life prior to his discovery of photography, his realisation that this was a skill he possessed made him determined to hold on to it as a career and make a name for himself. Perhaps the insecurity that he felt over his work stemmed from a knowledge that, were he to fail, he had little to fall back on that excited and motivated him. He felt an intense connection to his work, noting that 'I liked being a participant in things I

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[354] George Silk interview with John Loengard, 21 May 1993, in John Loengard, *Life Photographers: What They Saw* (Boston, MA: Bullfinch Press, 1998), 184.
[355] *Ibid.*, 184.
[356] Gael Newton, "Going to Extremes: George Silk, Photojournalist", National Gallery of Australia exhibition catalogue, 12 August – 12 November 2000. Available at <http://www.photo-web.com.au/gael/docs/silk.htm>. Accessed 17 Jan 2022.
[357] Gael Newton, "Going to Extremes: George Silk, Photographer", first published in *Art & Australia* 32, no. 1 (2000).
[358] Silk interview with Loengard, *Life Photographers*, 184.
[359] *Ibid.*, 184.
[360] 12 Apr 1940, 'Official Photographer Mr A. G. Silk, MP729/7, 72/421/9, NAA (Melbourne).
[361] Silk interview with Loengard, *Life Photographers*, 184.
[362] John Loengard, personal email to author prior to his death in May 2020, 8 May 2019.

photographed. I did best when I became—sometimes physically and sometimes in my mind—a participant'.[363]

This conception of his work as something that was essentially inseparable from himself as the maker of the photograph guided Silk's increasing awareness of photographic trends and technique. The photograph was, in his opinion, something that stemmed directly from the photographer's experiences and instincts. His side of the story was an essential element of how Silk approached his work and resulted in his interest in the documentary form. Through his work at the camera shop, he had been able to access photography magazines and periodicals from overseas and had clearly familiarised himself with some of the same materials that Parer had been obsessively collecting in Sydney.[364] He became familiar with the work of John Grierson, one of Parer's great inspirations, alongside numerous other documentary makers. 'I had developed this documentary sense', he said later, and 'had been following documentary movies, and studying them'.[365] He had become so interested in documentary photography that he and some fellow enthusiasts had started a club which 'entirely revolved around Grierson' and which studied the work of documentarists like Robert Flaherty and Basil Wright.[366] Flaherty in particular took the term 'creative treatment of actuality' as far as it would go through his fictive documentary films like *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926) and *Man of Aran* (1934).[367] Inspired by what they were trying to achieve through their work, Silk adopted the mentality that 'You are after the actuality. There's a document happening in front of you and you try to freeze it, but in trying to freeze it you try to bring the emotion as well that's happening there'.[368] Though he wanted his pictures to document reality, he also wanted them to tell a story and have artistic merit.

Despite this growing knowledge of the artform and determination to make his name in it, however, Silk remained an unknown photographer throughout the 1930s and, other than having a few photographs published in newspapers and magazines, had little taste of success in the way that Parer had. Indeed, prior to the war, Silk freely admitted that he had 'lived a sheltered life and I think it showed'.[369] The war, therefore, offered Silk the opportunity to finally make a name for himself and implement his 'documentary sense' amidst the brutal reality of armed conflict. 'I decided', he said later, 'that the only way I could really comfortably go to the war was to photograph it'.[370] Sensing the opportunity and romanticising his potential involvement, Silk recalled that 'it became a burning passion, a crusade to document the war. Maybe my pictures would save the world from wars'.[371] The

[363] Silk interview with Loengard, *Life Photographers*, 188.
[364] Newton, 'Going to Extremes: George Silk, Photojournalist'.
[365] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[366] *Ibid*.
[367] Richard Barsam, *The Vision of Robert Flaherty: The Artist as Myth and Filmmaker* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).
[368] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[369] *Ibid*.
[370] *Ibid*.
[371] George Silk letter to John B. Turner, 26 Dec 1972, cited in Newton, 'Going to Extremes: George Silk, Photojournalist'.

immaturity in his thinking is evident, but it is also clear that Silk's ego was drawing him towards the war, viewing it as the ultimate theatre for his documentary style of photography.

Appointment

By the outbreak of war, both Parer and Silk had developed a similar sense of what it was they were trying to achieve through their photography. Though Parer had slowly started to develop something of a reputation within film and photographic circles in Sydney, he was still largely unknown in Australia and had yet to find a long-term project to suit his artistic vision. Silk, meanwhile, had honed his craft in New Zealand, having his pictures published in various local magazines and newspapers, but he was still an amateur with almost no professional experience in the field. Both men, however, were determined that their pictures would have some kind of impact on society. The outbreak of war, therefore, presented them with an opportunity to implement their documentary approach in the extraordinary setting of armed conflict and, in the process, make a name for themselves.

To do this, of course, they would have to be appointed as war photographers. This would be significantly easier for Parer to achieve, particularly after his work on *This Place Australia*. By late 1939, Parer had found himself a berth at the Cinema Branch of the Department of Commerce in Melbourne, which was soon transferred to the control of the Department of Information in October that year.[372] The Department was tasked by prime minister Robert Menzies with assembling and distributing 'over the widest possible field, and by every available agency, the truth about the cause for which we are fighting in this war, and information bearing upon all phases of the struggle' and, in so doing, keep 'the minds of our people as enlightened as possible and their spirit firm'.[373] This would be done through the collection and distribution of war-related information, 'direction of propaganda overseas … and censorship'.[374] In terms of photographing the war, Parer's documentary approach, which also sought to celebrate Australia and its people, was a highly desirable quality.

Parer had been recruited by Edward Cranstone, who at that time was the head photographer at the Department of Commerce.[375] Cranstone, himself a dedicated follower of the documentary form, had first met Parer at the studio of the Melbourne-based Pictorialist photographer John Kauffmann in the mid-1930s.[376] Cranstone was particularly interested in the photography and filmmaking emerging from Europe and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s, and regularly attended film showings in Melbourne held by the Australia-Soviet Friendship League just prior to and during the war.[377] The films of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928), for instance, struck

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[372] Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World", 173.
[373] Robert Menzies speech to Parliament, 8 Sep 1939, *Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 312. Also cited in *Ibid.*, 5.
[374] Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World", 23.
[375] Martyn Jolly, 'Edward Cranstone, Photographer', *Photofile* 5 (1984): 2.
[376] *Ibid.*, 1.
[377] *Ibid.*, 3.

Cranstone as captivating examples of nationalistic visual propaganda, celebrating things like the heroism of the worker, which also retained artistic value.[378] Cranstone went on to adopt this approach himself during the war, photographing the manufacture of munitions and military training, before focusing on the workers of the Allied Works Council from 1942. His war photography, therefore, centred around 'evocative images of strength and heroism' and sought to capture the essence of the Australian 'spirit'.[379]

In his role at the newly formed Department of Information, which charged their photographers and cinematographers to produce images for 'publicity purposes', Cranstone understood that this celebratory approach was desirable.[380] Parer, as a deeply patriotic Australian and filmmaker with similar interests to himself, seemed an obvious choice to put forward for the role of official war photographer with the Department of Information. Parer's role was envisaged by Sir Henry Gullett, the then Minister for Information, as one which would see him produce work that could 'be used where practicable and, subject to censorship, for publicity purposes and then passed to the Australian War Memorial for preservation as historical records'.[381] This view of the official photographer as both documentarist and propagandist reflected the role of Frank Hurley in the First World War, but Parer's use of the film medium would add a new angle to it. Indeed, the Australian government was well aware of the growing potential of newsreels in particular to communicate a message to a wide audience. The 1930s had seen the rise of two prominent 'sound news magazines' in Australia: the *Cinesound Review*, an entertaining newsreel supervised by Ken G. Hall, and *Movietone News*.[382] These newsreels had grown in popularity at the start of the war, with the *Argus* commenting in 1940 that photographs were 'dull compared with the thrill of motion … Nothing could bring home more closely to Australians the reality of the ordeal'.[383] It was determined soon after the outbreak of the war that the government would allow these newsreel companies access to the footage provided by the Department's cameramen (like Parer) for a flat fee.[384] In return, the companies would edit the footage, provide commentary and distribute the newsreels. The result of this was what the Department referred to as the mobilisation of 'the film medium for national ends'.[385]

While Parer's role as an official war photographer with the Department of Information was, therefore, to gather material for both record-keeping purposes and propaganda, it was also recognised that his medium of motion photography was invested with a great deal of influence. While Maslyn Williams later wrote that 'Parer was *not* a propagandist by choice' and that he was primarily a 'documentarist as distinct from a news man', the artist in Parer must surely have seen the potential in his role to produce images, both still and moving, that

[378] *Ibid*., 3.
[379] *Ibid*., 2.
[380] Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World", 44.
[381] Sir Henry Gullett, War Cabinet addendum, 4 Jan 1940, AWM315: 653/001/003, AWM.
[382] Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 edition), 151.
[383] Cited in Shaune Lakin, *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection* (Canberra: AWM, 2006), 103.
[384] Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World", 231.
[385] Cited in *Ibid*., 230.

would have some kind of societal impact.[386] He noted to his friend Shirley Hines, for example, that he wished to achieve through film what the artist Will Dyson had achieved through his drawings in the First World War. Gifting her a copy of Dyson's book *Australians at War* in December 1942, he wrote inside the front cover:

> What a great act is Dyson. His work is as changeless as war. What emotion, what humanity his pen has shown us! If only through the medium of film we can follow him with halting footsteps … I suggest such is possible. We can evolve a new technique! A new film approach to men at war![387]

Parer recognised that his role as an official war photographer would allow him to explore his documentary approach in greater detail and examine how the techniques that he had been learning about for so long might be used in the crucible of war. Though he would largely be collecting material for news and propaganda purposes, this did not mean that what he produced would be devoid of artistic value. On the contrary, his nationalism and fascination with how the camera might best capture the Australian spirit was perfectly in tune with what the Department of Information wished him to achieve. Parer's artistic vision was not in conflict with the news and propaganda aspect of his work.

While Parer's appointment as an official war photographer was not completely out of the blue, having spent a number of years associating himself and working with some of Australia's foremost photographers and filmmakers, George Silk's appointment with the Department of Information was unprecedented. Williams, who worked in the Department's Film Unit overseas as a writer and producer from 1940, later wrote that Silk was 'practically an amateur at the time [whose] development was in many ways even more sensational than Parer's'.[388] Knowing that he wanted to photograph the war rather than fight it, Silk had attempted to join the New Zealand military as a photographer in Auckland. At the recruiting office, however, he became convinced that, were he to sign up then and there, his photographic ambitions would be overlooked and he would find himself in an unrelated role. He determined that 'the only other thing I could do was come to Australia and try and get a job here, and if I didn't succeed then I would just simply have to join the Australian Army … because I didn't have my fare [back] to New Zealand'.[389] Having spent three weeks in Sydney, Silk travelled to Canberra in April 1940 with a portfolio of his work with the ambitious idea of presenting it to the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies. While the details are vague, he did manage to obtain an audience with Menzies's chief aid who, impressed with the pictures, presented the Prime Minister with Silk's portfolio. So taken was Menzies with his pictures that he immediately offered Silk a job as an official photographer with the Department of Information. Silk then found himself in Melbourne where he was 'fitted with this flashy looking uniform … and within a couple of days I was on a boat heading for the

[386] Maslyn Williams papers, comments on Neil McDonald article draft and notes on film script by John Duigan, April 1987, MS 3936, box 37, folder unnumbered, NLA.
[387] Parer inscription to Shirley Hines, December 1942, Neil McDonald papers c.1997-2006, MLMSS 7838, folder 4, SLNSW.
[388] Williams letter to Dick Mason and Tony Morphett regarding proposed film about Damien Parer, 1979, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 61, NLA.
[389] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.

Middle East'.[390] This meant that Silk would be working alongside Parer. As an Army minute paper noted, Silk 'has been appointed Official Photographer to the A.I.F. The Department of Information advises that Mr. Silk, although receiving the same pay and allowances, will rank as junior to Mr. D. Parer, Official Photographer at present abroad with the A.I.F.'.[391]

Figure 6: George Silk at his embarkation for the Middle East, Melbourne, April 1940 (Edward Cranstone, AWM)

As will be discussed later in the thesis, Silk would be granted an extraordinary amount of freedom to roam and explore his artistic instincts. His appointment, however, was deeply controversial among Australian journalists and press photographers who felt that Silk was both unqualified and undeserving of the role. Upon his appointment, Henry Gullett claimed that 'Silk was a photographer of outstanding capacity and promise. Although so young, he was expert in the taking of both still and moving pictures'.[392] The Australian Journalists' Association, however, took aim at Gullett's statement, noting that the Government had appointed 'an assistant official photographer with the A.I.F. abroad who is not a member of the A.J.A.' and that 'the position was one for which several well qualified members of the Association had applied'.[393] As a New Zealand national, the Association felt as if Silk had simply strolled into the country and picked up a much sought after appointment. And in effect he had. In a letter sent to Gullett in early May 1940, the Association noted the air of secrecy surrounding Silk's appointment until after he was already on his way to the Middle East,

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[390] *Ibid*.
[391] Minute paper, Department of Army, by Chief of the General Staff, 12 Apr 1940, MP729, 72/421/9, NAA (Melbourne).
[392] *Herald* (Melbourne), 15 Apr 1940.
[393] *The Journalist*, May 1940, 8.

writing that they had ‘expected that the same procedure would be adopted as in the selection of the Official War Correspondent [Kenneth Slessor]’.[394] ‘He had not qualifications for the job equal to those possessed by a senior newspaper photographer’, they continued, condemning the fact that ‘no newspaper photographer of Mr. Silk’s experience would be rated above junior status’.[395] In response, Gullett simply claimed that Silk was ‘completely outstanding above his competitors’, writing that ‘Photography and cinematography are a very important form of service and I would have considered it most improper to have passed Mr. Silk over’.[396] One can only surmise that Menzies and Gullett must have been truly impressed with Silk’s work and ambition. Menzies, Silk later claimed, ‘wanted a young man … he understood exactly what I was saying when I said I wanted to photo-document the troops’.[397]

Despite the controversy, the Department now had an Official Photographer and Assistant Official Photographer in the field who shared a similar artistic conception of their work and valued documentary photography. Upon first meeting Parer, who had set sail from Australia in January 1940, Silk recalled that they had an ‘immediate connection’ and ‘didn’t stop talking for about twenty hours’.[398] ‘We talked about movies and we talked about photography and what we were trying to do … we’d got here somehow and we were just determined to document what happened to the diggers’, he continued, ‘we just continued the conversation that I’d been having with these two or three guys like I’d had in Auckland when we would look at Grierson and Flaherty’.[399] Both Parer and Silk would, of course, have to work within a set of parameters as dictated by the Department and the Army (this will be discussed later in the thesis). They saw in their roles, however, a large degree of artistic freedom that would allow them to act on the knowledge of their fields that they had been developing throughout most of the 1930s. The war presented them with the chance to explore and add meat to the bones of their artistic vision and ideas. Having realised that they shared a very similar outlook, the task before them could be considered a kind of collaborative endeavour to achieve a place for their art in society. ‘I think that Damien and I had a oneness of thought’, Silk said later, ‘this probably doesn’t happen to many people in their lifetimes, that you fit in so exactly with someone’.[400] The next chapter will explore the nature of this collaboration.

[394] Australian Journalists’ Association letter to Sir Henry Gullett, 8 May 1940, cited in *Ibid*.
[395] *Ibid*.
[396] *Ibid*.
[397] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[398] *Ibid*.
[399] *Ibid*.
[400] *Ibid*.

Part Two:

Reporting the War

By the outbreak of the Second World War, the war correspondents considered here had come to journalistic work by various routes. All six men had an element of creative artistry in their lives which would inform the way that they set about their work during the war. This section will analyse three key aspects of their lives and work as war correspondents, further developing the ideas introduced in Part One and exploring their contributions to the profession.

Chapter six will look at their work 'in the field', examining some significant episodes from their lives on the frontlines and the nature of their interactions with their peers. Chapter seven will consider the restrictions placed on them as war correspondents, analysing how, often as a group, they worked together with their peers to overcome perceived injustices and obstructions to their work. Chapter eight will discuss their contributions to and engagement with the Anzac legend, arguing that, through their work, the legend was further embellished and reinvigorated, particularly with the assistance of modern technology.

Part Two is certainly not intended to be a full account of their lives as war correspondents, charting everything that happened to them during their war years. Rather, it adopts a thematic approach, seeking to engage with selected themes and ideas which are particularly significant and relevant to the discussion points of the first five chapters. I have, so far as it is possible, shown 'who the man was' prior to and at the time of his appointment as a war correspondent—I will now show 'what he did' at various moments in the role, explaining in the process how he conceived of his work and the nature of his interaction with the wider war correspondent network.

Chapter Six

In the Field: 'A Vast National Work'?

This chapter is not intended as a descriptive list of exactly what the war correspondents did in the field, precisely charting their exact movements and career progressions. Rather, it examines their approach to their work as war correspondents, the weight of expectation from their respective employers, and the nature of some of their interactions (or lack thereof) with their peers in the field. As will be discussed, life as a correspondent in the field could be solitary and lonely, however it was, for most, impossible to avoid periods of close interaction with others. Certainly in the Middle East in the first years of the war, the individuals of key focus here, with the exception of Kenneth Slessor, worked as part of a team with a fairly clear purpose. These interactions could be defined by close cooperation or intense rivalry and personal dislike.

Though chapter seven will concern issues such as the restrictions placed on war correspondents, not least of which was censorship, what will become clear is that, particularly in the Middle East, these journalists operated with a great deal of freedom, defining the nature of their role almost 'on the job'. No amount of preparation and pre-departure briefings could have been sufficient to truly appreciate exactly how they would set about their work in the field or how their interactions with others would affect their lives and output on and around the front lines. As such, what follows is a close examination of what these correspondents thought and felt about their roles as well as the effect of their output.

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The New Bean?: Kenneth Slessor and the Official War Correspondent Job

A dedicated interest in the Anzac tradition notwithstanding, at the age of thirty-nine Kenneth Slessor was fortunate that the war broke out when it did. Applicants for the Official Australian War Correspondent job had to be under forty years of age. For Slessor, the job seemed like a dream journalistic assignment—a chance to make a real and lasting contribution to the 'diggers' who *Smith's Weekly* had long celebrated. 'Ever since I can remember', he wrote in its pages shortly after his appointment in April 1940, '*Smith's* has been the Digger's paper … I read it, as a schoolboy, and felt its purpose'.[401] With Slessor's artistic and journalistic background, his appointment was filled with promise and the belief that he would live up to the example of Charles Bean, Australia's first Official War Correspondent. Claude McKay, co-founder of *Smith's Weekly*, wrote to Slessor shortly before he departed for the war, stating that 'I have always admired your gifts and the whole-hearted way you bestowed them on *Smith's* … I know you will make a name for yourself with the A.I.F. and you will make it by being yourself'.[402] When Slessor departed Australia for England abroad the *Mauretania* on 5 May 1940 on 'a wet and weeping Sunday, [with the] sky full of smoke and rain', however, the weather appeared to be an ill-omen of times to come.[403] Slessor's time in the job was an unhappy one, filled with disappointment over what could have been, and scarred by anger and frustration over what was.

Slessor set about the job with great zeal, believing that, as the Government's own correspondent (as opposed to those in the employment of newspapers) he would be granted a privileged position to record an official version of events, intended for distribution to all papers, 'without the rush for quick news looming over me at every moment'.[404] He was also firmly under the impression that after the war he would return to Australia and 'start writing the official history', much as Bean had done after the First World War.[405] Slessor highlighted the work of both Bean and Sir Henry Gullett, who had joined Bean as an official war correspondent and subsequently worked alongside him as an official historian, time and again as setting the standard that he sought to live up to.[406] This is significant not only because Slessor was following in Bean's footsteps and hoping to emulate his work, but also because there was no formal job description for the role. Prior to his departure and before he had witnessed any combat, Slessor crafted something of a fantasy about what he would actually be doing when he reached the war, framing his task and responsibilities in the mould (and shadow) of Bean.

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401 *Smith's Weekly*, 6 Apr 1940, 3.
402 Claude McKay letter to Kenneth Slessor, 25 Apr 1940, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 1, folder 1, NLA.
403 Slessor diary, 5 May 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 5-6.
404 *Smith's Weekly*, 20 Apr 1940, 4.
405 *Daily News* (Sydney), 2 Apr 1940, 2.
406 Gullett has been described as 'one of Bean's principal collaborators on the official history'. See "Gullett, Sir Henry Somer" in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, eds. Peter Dennis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 251.

‘The responsibility’, Slessor told readers of *Smith’s Weekly*, ‘is one which is making me think harder than I have ever had to think in my life before’.[407] He was thankful, however, that ‘in this task I have the enormous assistance of the work that has been so finely done before me by Sir Henry Gullett and Dr Bean, both of whom have given me their kind and generous help’.[408] In the absence of a formal job description, Gullett and Bean had entirely shaped Slessor’s impression of what he was to do in the job and how he was to go about it. Their advice stemmed from their own experiences in the First World War and proved to have little practical value when Slessor finally arrived in a conflict zone in early 1941 following six months of idleness in England with the AIF. His notebook for 1940 records multiple meetings with Gullett and Bean. In Melbourne on 26 April 1940, for example, he met with Gullett at the Department of Information’s head office, receiving some fairly vague directions. Gullett advised him to:

> Start w. first impression atmos. & descript. of camps as good 1st article … Will use my own discretion as to what news to call & when—not a quasi news-service … Keep even balance of quality between articles, so that even quality is maintained for newspaper distribution … Write occasional personal letter to Gullett, describing conditions, difficulties etc.[409]

Slessor believed that, as he would not have to act as a ‘quasi news-service’, he would be free to carefully craft his pieces which, he hoped, would feature regularly in the big daily papers. To have the freedom to access and gather the information required to write these pieces when overseas, he sought to ‘make friends [and] discuss problems’ with influential figures.[410] A few days after his meeting with Gullett, therefore, Slessor met with Blamey and then-major general John Lavarack at Corps HQ, before having lunch with Gullett, Percy Jenkin (the chief censor at the Department of Information) and other Department authorities at Melbourne’s Savage Club.[411] At this point in his notebook, Slessor’s lack of familiarity with the ‘nitty-gritty’ of military matters is apparent: he breaks down in great detail, for example, precisely what Divisions, Brigades and Battalions are.[412] For all his interest in ‘digger’ affairs during his time with *Smith’s Weekly*, these relatively straightforward details of the military hierarchy seem to have escaped him.

All this indicates that Slessor was very much learning on the job, but without much to go on other than the example set by Bean. He met with Bean in Sydney on 3 May shortly before boarding the *Mauretania*, though again seems to have received little practical instruction. Bean told him to:

> Get the stories of the men in the camps—subjective—how they view it … Get prisoners’ estimates & appreciations of our own men … In case of any difficulties

[407] *Smith’s Weekly*, 20 Apr 1940, 4.
[408] *Ibid*.
[409] Slessor notebook 1940-1941, 26 Apr 1940, Kenneth Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 12, folder 7, NLA.
[410] *Ibid*.
[411] *Ibid*.
[412] *Ibid*.

> practical or otherwise to be smoothed out in Aust. Write Bean, letting him know what I want done, & he will take steps here. Also write personally.[413]

Bean rang Slessor the following day, promising 'to move at future date soon to have my salary increased—present salary he regarded as probationary'.[414] These early entries in his notebook demonstrate Slessor's excitement to be mixing among such distinguished names, believing that, courtesy of his newfound job title, his name too would soon be considered their equal. Having spent so much time at *Smith's Weekly*, his closeness to the men of the AIF as the official correspondent filled him with a sense of both honour and entitlement. He was not shy in stressing his formal attachment to the armed forces. In a lecture delivered to troops and officers aboard the *Franconia* as he sailed from England to the Middle East in early 1941, for example, he stated quite bluntly that 'I emphasize again that my job *is* an AIF job. That is to say, I am a member of the AIF the same as any one of you'.[415] The prestige that he believed the position gave him even resulted in a sense of superiority over his fellow war correspondents. 'I am an *official* war correspondent and not a *private* one', he continued in his lecture:

> The private correspondents … are not actual members of the AIF … I, on the contrary, am appointed by the Government of the people of Australia to serve not just one section of the people, but the whole of the people. What I see and what I write goes not to one paper or to one section, but to *all* the papers in Australia, and to the entire nation.[416]

Slessor had likely been emboldened in this sense of superiority by the belief that it would be his 'official' version of events which would primarily shape how the deeds of the Second AIF would be remembered, just as Bean's narrative shaped the popular memory of the First AIF. As Peter Rees has written in his biography of Bean, Bean 'had seen it as his task to identify, highlight and shape public perception of national values and achievements'.[417] Slessor wanted to achieve something similar for the Second AIF, even though Bean had already set in stone the mythology of the Australian fighting man.[418] Echoing Slessor's ambition for the role, Frank Ashton, the editor-in-chief of Associated Newspapers in Sydney, wrote to Gullett upon Slessor's appointment, stating that 'I have always regarded him as one of the most outstanding descriptive writers in Australia. His literary merits and high personal qualities ensure that the deeds of the Second AIF will be inscribed on the tablets of time with all the vigour, colour and accuracy that the subject demands'.[419] Slessor's literary qualities and

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[413] *Ibid*.
[414] *Ibid*.
[415] Kenneth Slessor lecture, 'The Work of an Official War Correspondent', cited in Semmler (ed.), *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 579.
[416] *Ibid.*, 579.
[417] Peter Rees, *Bearing Witness: The Remarkable Life of Charles Bean, Australia's Greatest War Correspondent* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015), xvi-xvii.
[418] One of Bean's other biographers, Ross Coulthart, has written that his 'writing was undoubtedly one of the sparks for Australia's nascent nationalism in the early twentieth century … Bean's wartime reports mythologised the Australian soldier, and fired the notion that the Anzacs achieved something nation-defining on the shore of Gallipoli and the battlefields of Western Europe'. Ross Coulthart, *Charles Bean* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2014), xviii-xx.
[419] Cited in *Ibid.*, xxi.

credentials as a journalist had enabled him to get the job and it was hoped that they would assist him as he crafted an image of the AIF's men in his despatches.

Figure 7: Kenneth Slessor on the day of his departure from Sydney for Britain, 5 May 1940 (AWM)

Slessor, however, had to wait some time before he witnessed the men in action. Following his departure from Sydney in May 1940, he spent June to early January 1941 in Britain, stationed with Australian troops in Salisbury and doing little of note. The most significant event for Slessor during this time occurred back home in Australia, when Gullett, along with other senior politicians and the Chief of the General Staff Sir Brudenell White, was killed in the Canberra air disaster of August 1940. 'Everybody is stunned by the news', he wrote in his diary, 'I felt a great shock at Gullett's death—I had seen so much of him just before leaving Australia, and he had been so particularly kind to me'.[420] If Slessor had little real understanding of what it was that he should be doing prior to this, the death of his primary benefactor before he had even witnessed any combat was a painful blow. Alongside Bean, Gullett had been Slessor's primary contact for all issues relating to his role. Slessor was thus increasingly left to his own devices, ever-reliant on the way that Bean had conducted himself in the role during the First World War to shape what he should be doing in the field.

This reliance on Bean had always been evident whenever Slessor publicly discussed the job. 'I will go right to the scene of all important actions', he boldly claimed after his appointment,

[420] Slessor diary, 13 Aug 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 87.

'and from a special vantage point will make my own notes on what I see. Then I'll interview the men who took part and get their viewpoint. I'll take their names and their home addresses … That's the technique Dr. C. E. W. Bean used in the Great War, and I don't hope to improve on that'.[421] In his lecture to troops in early 1941, meanwhile, he stated that:

> What I want to get from you are the facts as you saw them. Bean's method was to get a man to name the last officer he had seen, thus giving a rough check of time and place … his methods are still the best … I don't want you to feel that you are glamorizing yourself or your mates by giving me these details. There is nothing undignified about it—on the contrary, you will be helping to produce a vast national work which will mean a lot, I hope, to Australia's development as a nation.[422]

Clearly Slessor believed that he was to perform a role of national significance, and that the way to do this was to follow in Bean's footsteps. Bean's Official History was, he claimed, 'the most complete and the best national history' of the First World War.[423] Through his consistent praising of Bean at every opportunity, Slessor was likely disguising his own naïve ambition in the role, believing that he had the artistic and literary credentials to equal or surpass Bean. In this way, Slessor likely possessed a motivation which the historian Greg McLaughlin has pointed to as fuelling the ambition of numerous war correspondents. 'At a very basic level', McLaughlin writes, 'the job may satisfy the "terrible show-off" in a journalist', while war provides the capability to 'fulfil their dearest *Boy's Own* fantasies'.[424]

Slessor believed that the role would assure him a high degree of prestige and that he would be able to assert significant influence over how Australians would remember the Second World War, much as Bean had done. In his role as the official correspondent and, he presumed, historian, he sought to produce work which would enable future generations of Australians to 'have a record of what we have done, to encourage them in the things which they may do—so that the Australia of the future may have a proper perspective of the past, without which it can never become conscious of itself as a nation'.[425] The role of the Official War Correspondent in general had, however, lost any real sense of glamour and much of its prestige by the Second World War. In her research concerning the appointment of New Zealand's two official correspondents for the conflict, John Herbert Hall and Robin Templeton Miller, historian Allison Oosterman has noted the 'lack of interest, debate or even speculation about whether the country would send correspondents to cover the actions of the 2nd NZEF', which was a stark difference to the interest in Malcolm Ross's appointment in 1915.[426] The general feeling was that the 'golden age' of the official correspondent had been during the First World War and that the title now was somewhat anachronistic. In the

[421] *Daily News* (Sydney), 2 Apr 1940, 2.
[422] Slessor lecture, 'The Work of an Official War Correspondent', *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 581.
[423] *Ibid.*, 578.
[424] Greg McLaughlin, *The War Correspondent* (London: Pluto Press, 2016 edition), 19.
[425] *Ibid.*, 579.
[426] Allison Oosterman, "'The Silence of the Sphinx': The Delay in Organising Media Coverage of World War II", *Pacific Journalism Review* 20, no. 2 (2014): 193.

Australian context, this was reflected by the lack of response to Slessor's despatches, which were usually heavily edited.

In England in the second half of 1940, Slessor soon realised that his determination to produce work of national significance would not be a straightforward task. The first major warning signs that he would not be able to produce the kind of nationally significant writing that he envisioned came when his father wrote to him in September. Slessor had been happily filing despatches on the AIF's limited activities in England when he received his father's letter. 'Father mentions that the *Sydney Morning Herald* uses only snippets of my stuff—and vilely sub-edited at that', he wrote in his diary, 'and gives me no credit by name, only "the official correspondent"'.[427] Thoroughly dejected by this lack of reception for himself and his work, Slessor stated despondently that 'I am now avoiding reading my despatches in print as much as possible, since I find that the inevitable mutilations, manglings, misreads and idiocies which accompany their publication put me into a futile rage and then depress me'.[428] Before he had even entered a combat zone, therefore, Slessor began to feel the disappointment which marked much of his time as the Official War Correspondent. A longstanding opponent of over-censorship in Australia (as mentioned in chapter three), the 'mangling' of his despatches represented for Slessor a petty kind of editorial 'censorship', with newspapers taking what they liked from his reports and discarding the rest. As editor of *Smith's Weekly* from 1935, Slessor had been used to having his writing published in full and as he had intended. Now, however, he found that he was not in total control of his work, writing that his first despatches 'have been horribly mutilated and chopped about, slices from different despatches appearing all mixed together without much context … [I] hope that when the arrangements become more systematic, the treatment will be better'.[429]

Slessor was, it seems, struggling to come to terms with the fact that the word 'official' in his job title actually served to hamper him, rather than facilitate his efforts to report in a manner that he believed was befitting of the official correspondent. Writing to John Treloar, then-Secretary of the Department of Information, in late September 1940, Slessor complained that the big daily papers 'should either use all the copy supplied in its original form, or not at all'.[430] Continuing, he noted his dissatisfaction with 'the *Herald*'s habit of describing [Ian] Fitchett in Palestine as "The Official Correspondent"' (Fitchett had been acting official correspondent, before being appointed 'Assistant Official War Correspondent' in February 1941).[431] The seeming disregard for his status as the *official* correspondent riled Slessor throughout the war. When he finally departed England for the Middle East, arriving in Egypt in early March 1941, for example, he was 'annoyed' because military headquarters had failed 'to indicate that I was the official correspondent' to the officers of the ship that carried him.[432] This apparent disregard, he perceived, was symptomatic of the Department's lack of direction for him, writing that 'I have received no instructions or messages from the

[427] Slessor diary, 13 Sep 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 112.
[428] *Ibid.*, 112.
[429] Slessor diary, 6 Aug 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 83.
[430] Slessor diary, 28 Sep 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 125.
[431] *Ibid.*, 125.
[432] Slessor diary, 4 Mar 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 199.

Department, which has apparently forgotten my existence'.[433] Having found himself at long last close to where Australians had seen action, Slessor realised that there was little indication from the Department of precisely what he should be doing. A few days later, he wrote in his diary that 'The problem now arises, what are to be the relative functions of Fitchett and myself?'.[434] The lack of formal directives from the Department had finally become apparent to Slessor—while the other correspondents around him in the Middle East seemed to have a clear purpose, he likely realised his 'separateness' among the milieu of those on the hunt for news.

This became increasingly apparent to him during and after the calamitous Greek campaign of April 1941, described by historian Joan Beaumont as an 'ignominious [Allied] defeat'.[435] During this time, with his despatches continuing to be heavily edited and failing to make the impression that he had hoped for in the press, Slessor consulted with Treloar, who himself was in the Middle East and had been Bean's assistant in collecting records during the First World War, 'during which we discussed all angles of my job, the first time I've been able to get anything approaching a definition of it'.[436] Treloar, it seemed to Slessor, was 'genuinely anxious to help, but has all the mental rigidity and insistence on regulation of the traditional public servant'.[437] Despite Slessor's low regard for him, Treloar made a number of suggestions which provided him with a somewhat clearer idea of how he might go about his job:

> 1. I should concentrate on the long-range view, gather confidential material for it, such as could not be published at the moment, but to be held by me for future use—and, in consequence, leave the bulk of the "spot-news" work to Fitchett. 2. I should therefore try to get more contact with the staff, high commanding officers, etc., both to assess their abilities, personalities and characters, and to get inside knowledge of plans and events from them. This, of course, would postulate my securing their complete confidence, hence the less I write for immediate publication the better. 3. To secure these facilities, I should be quartered with the staff at Headquarters away from the rest of the Press correspondents. 4. I should make independent visits to units and scenes of operations (i.e., not with the rest of the Press unit), to avoid duplication, and to get away from the psychological effects of a mass descent of correspondents … 7. I should co-operate closely with Treloar's records—organization—suggest photographs and data which would be useful for future historical work—his department to supply the bare documentary bones for the future, I to clothe them from my own observations and notes of country, conditions and men.[438]

This is a quite remarkable diary entry, for it suggests that Slessor was no longer being looked to as someone to provide news and thus the 'first draft of history', but rather as someone who

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[433] *Ibid.*, 199.
[434] Slessor diary, 7 Mar 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 204.
[435] Joan Beaumont, "Australia's War: Europe and the Middle East" in *Australia's War 1939-1945*, ed. Joan Beaumont (Oxford: Routledge, 2020 edition), 12.
[436] Slessor diary, 20 May 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 283.
[437] *Ibid.*, 283.
[438] *Ibid.*, 283-284.

was a mere collector of evidence, quietly going about this so as to assist Treloar and others with the subsequent documentation of the war. Acquiring news appeared to be of no significance in this interpretation of the role. Rather, carefully making a record of events by using his official status to gain privileged access to high-ranking officers would be the prime focus. This, however, would seem to be advice tailored towards the Official Historian as opposed to the Official War Correspondent—a role that Slessor had never been formally offered.

Ian Fitchett recalled that Treloar's advice had the effect of keeping Slessor 'close to corps headquarters rather than being out in the field where the Official War Correspondent as opposed to the Official Historian should have been—for the Official War Correspondent was in a sense the news man for the Australian press through the Department of Information'.[439] As time wore on Slessor himself became less than enthused by the possibility of later becoming the Official Historian, writing in Cairo at the end of 1941 that 'I still can't decide with my conscience whether I really want it'.[440] With this in mind, alongside the sense that his role as a war correspondent was actually rather redundant, Slessor likely felt somewhat purposeless. It leads one to ask a significant question: what was the *point* of Slessor's work in the field if nobody, including himself, was really sure what his job actually entailed, if the news side of things was not an aspect of his work as the official correspondent, and if he had decided that he had no real interest in later becoming the Official Historian? As Slessor's biographer, Geoffrey Dutton, has written, 'He was really writing war history, but he was not, like Gavin Long, an official war historian. Nor was he … a scene-of-the-action journalist writing directly to the readers of a particular newspaper … He was supposed to stand back and take the longer view, to write features rather than reports. But this was never clarified'.[441]

Furthermore, Treloar's advice emphasised the degree of separation between Slessor and the other war correspondents, implying that he should operate independently of them and even secure and withhold 'inside knowledge'. This, of course, would be a sure way to socially isolate himself from the group—he would be taking no risk to his life, unlike most of the other correspondents, while simultaneously gaining 'insider' information. He had first become familiar with his fellow correspondents upon his arrival in the Middle East in March 1941, meeting John Hetherington, Gavin Long and James Aldridge in Egypt, and soon after meeting Damien Parer, Ron Maslyn Williams, and Chester Wilmot. In the build up to the Greek campaign, Slessor played cards and socialised with them, hoping that the upcoming opportunity to witness some real action would spark his job to life.[442]

His experiences in Greece, however, added further to his sense of disillusionment. Any possibility of special treatment seemed to be an impossible hope. In mid-March, for example, Slessor was informed by a low-ranking officer that a 'decisive push' against the Italians in

[439] Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 253.
[440] Slessor diary, 5 Dec 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 327.
[441] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 253.
[442] *Ibid.*, 198.

Egypt was planned for the following day, prompting him to write that this ‘was a complete surprise … and I was greatly angered, as it indicated an utter absence of liaison between headquarters and myself as official correspondent’.[443] This kind of confusion continued in Greece, where Slessor arrived with other correspondents on 27 March 1941. Having witnessed the evacuation, he was aghast at the campaign’s mismanagement and believed that this needed to be laid bare. ‘I feel that a mere summary of the news facts of the campaign would be ridiculously beside the main and vital point’, he wrote in his diary, ‘which is that either the British or Australian Government or both was prepared callously and cynically to sacrifice a comparatively small force of Australian fightingmen for the sake of a political gesture—i.e. to gamble with Australian lives on a wild chance, wilder than Gallipoli’.[444] Even if it meant implicating Menzies and Churchill, Slessor was determined to ‘get the real story back to Australia’ despite knowing that censorship would certainly block him from reporting the kind of story that he sought to write.[445] He soon realised, however, that there was simply no opportunity of doing this—there were, as Geoffrey Dutton has observed, ‘too many people in high places involved in the debacle for the truth to be allowed into the open air’.[446] Along with the other correspondents who had been present in Greece, Slessor was informed by the PR office at the end of April that the evacuation ‘was still in progress, and no mention whatever could be made of it until finished’.[447]

On top of this, Slessor’s longstanding animosity towards General Blamey (as mentioned in chapter three) can be traced to the Greek debacle. Having interviewed Blamey in Cairo on 30 April, Slessor was informed by him that ‘you will never get an article containing such criticism past the censor’.[448] Slessor was well aware of this, however he was able to convey a limited sense of the tragedy of the campaign in his despatches, writing that the evacuation was ‘comparable with the raggle-taggle armada of Dunkirk’.[449] Any broader criticism simply would not be allowed, with Slessor writing that ‘no doubt a correspondent who tries to criticize the Greek fiasco will be accused of helping enemy propaganda’.[450] Having finally witnessed Australian troops in action, therefore, he was left increasingly disillusioned by his work, realising that, rather than having some kind of special influence as the official correspondent, he was actually highly restricted in nearly every aspect of his role. Blamey was, he felt, symptomatic of the wider disregard for his supposed status. Indeed, when he later reported on the Allied invasion of Syria and Lebanon in June-July 1941, Slessor wrote one of only two poems that he composed during the war. The poem, ‘An Inscription for Dog River’, was a thinly veiled acerbic comment on Blamey’s hubris and pomposity, ending with the lines that the troops had ‘given him everything, in fact/Except respect’.[451] The war, it seemed, had sucked some of the creative life out of Slessor, and it is telling that one of his two wartime poems was directed towards Blamey, who became a focal point of much of his

[443] Slessor diary, 16 Mar 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 209.
[444] Slessor diary, 27 Apr 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 267.
[445] *Ibid.*, 267.
[446] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 205.
[447] Slessor diary, 28 Apr 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 268.
[448] Slessor diary, 30 Apr 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 270.
[449] Slessor despatch, 1 May 1941, ‘Summary of the Evacuation’, *The War Despatches of Kenneth Slessor*, 155.
[450] Slessor diary, 29 Apr 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 269.
[451] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 218.

frustrations. No doubt the endless stream of despatches 'botched, butchered, misphrased, disjointed and stupidly filled out' when they were used by the papers left him devoid of enthusiasm to write much else.[452] 'I'm beyond shock', Slessor wrote after the Greek campaign, 'at this kind of stupidity now'.[453] A letter he received from Bean in August 1941, in which Bean noted that 'I expect that you find your stuff very much cut about here [in Australia]', before somewhat laughably claiming that 'the explanation probably is the shortage of paper which has so much reduced all the news space', would hardly have come as much comfort.[454]

Figure 8: Australian war correspondents arriving in Alexandria from Crete, 27 April 1941 (Kenneth Slessor bottom left), (George Silk, AWM)

Exasperated as he was by the unforeseen confines and particularities of his job, there was one major aspect of Slessor's life as a war correspondent in which he simply did not help himself. This was the constant presence of his wife, Noela, in and around the areas that he was reporting from prior to his return to Australia in February 1943. It is not entirely clear how Slessor was allowed to bring Noela along to the war with him, though it seems likely that the permission was granted by Gullett.[455] Slessor himself seems to have at first been reluctant to allow Noela to accompany him, cabling her from Britain prior to her arrival there in late

[452] Slessor diary, 15 May 1941, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 281.
[453] *Ibid.*, 281.
[454] Charles Bean letter to Slessor, 27 Aug 1941, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 1, folder 1, NLA.
[455] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 183.

August 1940 'situation here dangerous advise you return Australia'.[456] Noela, however, ignored this advice, and many of Slessor's diary entries during the time they spent in Britain are full of descriptions of various sightseeing trips (such as one to Stonehenge on 31 August), social lunches and drinks.[457] While this may not have been particularly scandalous during the time they spent in Britain, the issue was heightened by Noela's presence in the Middle East and significantly damaged Slessor's reputation among his fellow war correspondents and military personnel alike. This was partly because, despite his constant assertions that he was not being treated in a manner befitting the official correspondent, Slessor was perceived to be receiving special treatment in being allowed to have his wife present.

Colonel Alexander Sheppard, who won the Military Cross for his actions in Greece, later recalled that:

> Slessor had an argument with General Iven Mackay [GOC 6th Division AIF] … Mackay thought that Ken Slessor shouldn't have had his wife there. Not merely because it was bad for the troops who couldn't have their wives there, but also because a lot of very senior officers in the AIF didn't think that General Blamey should have his wife there. And the fact that Slessor having his wife there rather blunted their efforts to make Blamey change his mind. I think it was a mistake on Ken Slessor's part to have his wife there. I'm sure it must have interfered with his work.[458]

Sheppard was right in thinking that Slessor's work was adversely affected by the nature of the arrangement. During the German counteroffensive of early 1942, for instance, in which Axis forces pushed east towards Alexandria and Cairo (where Noela and the Press unit were based), Slessor was caught up in the resultant panic and arrangements for evacuations.[459] 'This put me in a painful dilemma', he wrote in his diary, 'since I was torn between my job, which is obviously to stay with the Australians to the last possible moment, and the business of getting Noela to Palestine', later writing that 'it was obviously impossible to concentrate my best work on the job while I was worried about Noela's safety in Cairo'.[460] The distraction that this caused Slessor was obvious to those around him. Recalling his time spent with Slessor during the war, Ian Fitchett stated that:

> Ken was very much more occupied with his wife and her safety than with his job. In fact I think his disaster was the presence of … Noela in the Middle East. He was devoted to her and she became his number one worry through the time of great panic in Egypt at the time of Rommel's advance when Egypt looked like going … without her he would have spent a lot more time with the troops.[461]

During his long periods of inactivity in the Middle East, Noela was Slessor's primary focus of attention. Frustrated by the limitations of his job, he sought refuge in his wife's company

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[456] Slessor diary, 19 Jun 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 48.
[457] Slessor diary, 31 Aug 1940, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 102.
[458] Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 228.
[459] Semmler, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, xliii.
[460] Slessor diary, 1 and 2 Jul 1942, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 425-426.
[461] Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 227.

at nearly every opportunity. How crushing it would have been, then, when Slessor discovered in April 1942 that Noela had been having an affair with his fellow Australian war correspondent, John Hetherington. Slessor's diary entries suggest that he had suspected Noela's infidelity for some time. For the entries in March, for example, which were written in Cairo, Slessor carefully recorded the exact time at which she returned to the hotel they were staying in, which was usually not until the early hours of the morning.[462] On 6 April, Slessor finally confronted Noela and Hetherington about the affair, having waited in the lobby of the hotel until 2.10 a.m., at which time the pair arrived.[463] Though Slessor and Noela remained together after this, the humiliation of the affair added further to the disappointment of his war experience. Not only had he found himself separate from most of the other Australian war correspondents because of the nature of his job title, his personal life and mental wellbeing had been significantly damaged by his wife's relationship with Hetherington.

How lonely Slessor might have felt during the long periods in the Middle East when he was not very active in combat zones, particularly after this incident. Following the departure of his one true friend among the Australian correspondents, Ronald Monson, shortly after the affair, Slessor was deeply upset. Having been transferred from the Middle East to India in May 1942, Monson's redeployment created something of a void for Slessor. 'I was sorry to hear [of it]', he noted in his diary, 'as he is much my best friend, in fact only real friend, among the correspondents, and I shall miss him greatly'.[464] His time in the Middle East, therefore, was one of tremendous personal and professional disappointment. Bad luck even played a part in this from time to time—pneumonia, for example, prevented his witnessing of the final battle of El Alamein in October 1942.[465]

When he returned to Australia from the Middle East in late February 1943 (prior to commencing three short trips to New Guinea, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), therefore, Slessor was something of a broken man. Having realised very early that he would not be able to attain a similar status as Bean, he more or less gave up trying to be an effective war correspondent. Clyde Packer, co-founder of *Smith's Weekly*, reflected on 'the grinding dullness and uselessness of those long years' for Slessor, recalling his:

> Travelling about endlessly, often waiting for nothing, constantly arguing about petty issues with both the Australian military mentality and the Australian public service, and having to watch his contemporaries, who worked for individual papers, constantly beating him into print. In professional terms Slessor had a very bad war. World War II produced several distinguished Australian war correspondents. Slessor was not one of them.[466]

So why had Slessor not attained the same kind of reputation that Bean enjoyed during and after the First World War? As the original Official War Correspondent, Bean effectively had

[462] *Ibid.*, 219.
[463] *Ibid.*, 220.
[464] Slessor diary, 3 May 1942, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 382.
[465] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 226.
[466] Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 253-254.

a blank canvas to work with. Rather than following and attempting to imitate a predecessor, Bean had defined the role and, in the process, had helped shape the Anzac legend and the way that Australians imagined their role in the conflict. In this way, Bean was the great innovator, whereas Slessor was merely trying to step into his shoes amidst greater press competition and without clear instructions as to what precisely he was meant to be doing.

This uncertainty was significantly worsened by the death of Gullett in August 1940, who had been the primary force behind Slessor's appointment and his main point of contact. Rather than receiving prestige, Slessor felt that he was overlooked at almost every turn: there was no special treatment when he reached the war, his despatches were heavily edited in a manner he thoroughly disapproved of, and his reputation had suffered among the other correspondents and military personnel due to the presence (and subsequent affair) of his wife. In short, Slessor's hopes of living up to the example set by Bean were soon proven to be forlorn because Bean had been working in a particular set of circumstances at a different time and in a different war. There was, therefore, no real reason to believe that Slessor would be able to achieve something similar to Bean in the Second World War, particularly given the general disinterest in his work, which came even from his own employer, the Department of Information. Not needing to engage in what Slessor had called 'the rush for quick news', therefore, had actually worked against him in many ways. Whereas most of the other correspondents, particularly those who worked for newspapers, had clear objectives and were engaged in the struggle for news, resulting in some kind of dynamism in their work, Slessor drifted along devoid of real purpose and became increasingly frustrated because of this. By the time he reached New Guinea, these frustrations would eventually lead to his acrimonious resignation in 1944.

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The Old and the New: The Department of Information Film Unit in the Middle East, 1940-1942

By the time Frank Hurley arrived in the Middle East in September 1940 to head the Department of Information's recently formed Film Unit, he was nearly fifty-five years of age. Hurley had already enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a photographer and filmmaker, having built a reputation as a daring and adventurous master of his craft. He had accompanied Sir Ernest Shackleton on the ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, capturing famous images of *Endurance* as the ship was crushed by pack ice and sunk in the Weddell Sea in 1915. He then joined the First AIF as an official photographer in August 1917, witnessing the horror of the Western Front.[467] Having subsequently produced a number of documentary films, most notably *Pearls and Savages* (1921) about the native peoples of New Guinea, Hurley was routinely described as a 'famous Australian' and 'famous explorer' in the press, likely inflating his ego.[468] There was in Hurley's documentaries 'a sense of self-promotion and opportunistic contrivance that sometimes attracted criticism: they smacked of what contemporary pressmen called stunts'.[469] It was this sense of ego, alongside an approach to film and photography which was considered antiquated by the Second World War, that resulted in discontent among the new generation of photographers who worked under Hurley as part of the Film Unit. They were Damien Parer and George Silk (motion and still photographers), Ron Maslyn Williams (producer and script writer) and Alan Anderson (sound engineer), all of whom were under thirty.[470] Socially dysfunctional and plagued by disputes, the Film Unit nevertheless was able to provide a highly successful level of coverage and documentation of Australia's involvement in the war in the Middle East. Their divergent approaches to their efforts in the field resulted in a body of work which was, in Hurley's words, 'of inestimable value as an historical document' for the Second AIF'.[471]

Parer had arrived in the Middle East with the AIF's 6th Division in February 1940 as the Department of Information's sole photographer in the region, being joined by Silk in Palestine in May. The two formed an instant fondness for each other, with Parer writing to his then-girlfriend (and later wife) Marie that, although Silk was just twenty-three, 'he knows his work … [and] strangely enough we are rather alike in looks and more so in ways'.[472] At this time, however, the Australian Army took no active part in the fighting, meaning that Parer and Silk's activities were largely confined to photographing training activities. Unbeknownst to the two, Hurley had applied for both of their positions, believing his experience and qualifications to be unrivalled. His applications had, however, been rejected by Henry

[467] For an excellent overview of Hurley's life in photography prior to the Second World War, see Gael Newton, "The Perfect Picture: James Francis Hurley" in *South with Endurance: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition 1914-1917: The Photographs of Frank Hurley* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 33-64.
[468] *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 10 May 1928, 14; *Evening News* (Sydney), 12 Apr 1927, 14.
[469] Robert Dixon and Christopher Lee (eds.), *The Diaries of Frank Hurley: 1912-1941* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), xi.
[470] Silk's work is made up almost entirely of still photography, while Parer's was a combination of still and motion photography (predominantly the latter).
[471] Frank Hurley letter to Les Brereton, 31 Oct 1940, SP112/1: M146, 'Official Photographer's Reports. Second AIF Overseas', NAA (Canberra).
[472] Damien Parer letter to Marie Cotter, 26 May 1940, Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/4, SLNSW.

Gullett, who recalled with animosity Hurley's clash with Charles Bean in the First World War over Hurley's use of composite photographs (which is discussed briefly in chapter eight) and alleged 'unauthorised sales of official photographs'.[473] Upon hearing that two 'junior' photographers had been appointed ahead of him, Hurley expressed indignation in his diary. Following Silk's appointment, for example, he wrote:

> Sir Henry replied after considerable delay that he had appointed a young New Zealander—he mentioned that he was a man of promise and a good developer! These attributes struck me as absurdly amusing. The work called for a highly qualified man, accustomed to picture production, script writing, organisation and the thousand and one details that crop up in war photography.[474]

As mentioned in chapter five, Hurley was not alone in his criticism of Silk's appointment, with groups like the Australian Journalists' Association also expressing their frustration. More significant, though, was the concern of the Australian newsreel companies that the pictorial coverage of the country's role in the Middle East was essentially in the hands of two young and inexperienced photographers. As Maslyn Williams stated after the war, the big two newsreel companies in Australia, Cinesound and Movietone, wanted to be supplied with 'hot news' capable of drawing in audiences.[475] While 'the coming of sound in the late 1920s had brought new life to Australian newsreels', as the film historian Graham Shirley writes, it was the Second World War which 'brought them to a maturity'.[476] Recognising the newsreel's propaganda potential given its technological development, the Department saw the importance of companies like Cinesound and Movietone, noting in a report in mid-1940 that the newsreel was 'a medium for rapid and wide distribution of motion picture items'.[477] 'The News Reel companies are particularly valuable', the report continued, because 'they have facilities for the immediate issue of items which the branch would not otherwise have an opportunity of releasing … [and] they have an immediate coverage of a very large number of theatres for their regular weekly issues'.[478]

Lacking confidence in the unproven Parer and Silk, Williams noted, 'there had to be a compromise somewhere' between the companies and the Government.[479] This was reached when Sir Keith Murdoch, who had known Hurley during the First World War and had been appointed Director-General of Information in May 1940, assigned Hurley as a proven hand and industry insider to head the newly formed Film Unit.[480] The Unit would be based in Cairo and roam the Middle East, capturing in still and motion photography Australian activity in the region. With Hurley at the helm, the Government would retain ownership of all film

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[473] Alasdair McGregor, *Frank Hurley: A Photographer's Life* (Melbourne: Viking, 2004), 352.
[474] Frank Hurley diary entry, 8-15 Sep 1940, cited in McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 353.
[475] Ron Maslyn Williams interviewed by David Millar, 1981, Bib ID: 2582729, NLA.
[476] Graham Shirley, "Australian Cinema: 1896 to the Renaissance" in *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 27.
[477] Department of Information to Prime Minister Robert Menzies, 'Report on Cinema and Photographic Branch', 16 Apr 1940, SP195/1: 3/1/17, NAA (Canberra).
[478] *Ibid*.
[479] Maslyn Williams interviewed by Millar, 2582729, NLA.
[480] McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 354.

and photographic material, while the newsreel companies, satisfied by the presence of an established name heading photographic operations in the Middle East, would be responsible for the editing and distribution of the unit's output.[481] One of the industry's own men, Cinesound's Alan Anderson, was also brought into the team alongside Williams from the Department's Cinema Branch. This approach adopted by the Government and the newsreel companies was intended to streamline the process by which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the film medium could be mobilised 'for national ends'.[482]

With Hurley as its leader, a Departmental report stated that 'The unit will be fully equipped with direct sound recording apparatus, and the film exposed will be returned to this country for distribution through the local newsreel and through theatres in the form of featurettes and probably feature films'.[483] The broadening of the Unit's personnel was, therefore, intended to strengthen the Department's ability to reach the Australian public with its propaganda in a dynamic way, making use of modern sound and visual technology, while also satisfying the demands of the newsreel companies.

As such, it had a relatively clear objective in terms of sending material back to Australia which would both document the country's war effort in the Middle East and publicise this in the form of newsreel propaganda. As Charles Banfield, then Editor at the Department of Information, wrote to John Treloar of the Australian War Memorial in December 1939, the Department's photographers were expected to 'operate for record purposes as well as to supply current [publicity] needs'.[484] When Hurley finally arrived in the region in early September 1940, having been met by Parer and then driven to Jerusalem, he had a clear set of ideas about how he would achieve this and was publicly full of praise for the initial work conducted by Parer. Speaking to the press, Hurley stated that:

> We [the Film Unit] should be sending weekly newsreel items to Australia in a few weeks. I am also planning a special film, probably to be issued about monthly … It will endeavour to show not only what the Australian sailors, soldiers, and airmen are doing, but also why they are doing it. I am planning work on broad lines covering matters of high national significance, in addition to purely Australian items … I found the official photographer, Damien Parer, had done a splendid job here, practically single-handed, and has created an atmosphere of immense goodwill.[485]

In private correspondence too, Hurley praised the work that Parer had so far done largely on his own amidst challenging conditions. In a significant change of tune from his former protestations over Parer's appointment, Hurley wrote to Les Brereton, head of the Department's Cinema Branch, that 'I am convinced no finer choice could have been made than Parer. We get on very well together and he has created a goodwill that is of tremendous

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[481] *Ibid.*, 354.
[482] Vickery, "Telling Australia's Story to the World", 230.
[483] 'A Brief Report on the Activities of the Department of Information', 30 Oct 1940, A2680: 2/1940, NAA (Canberra).
[484] Charles Banfield letter to John Treloar, 7 Dec 1939, SP112/1: 422/3/2, 'Control of Photography: Press permits', NAA (Canberra).
[485] *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 19 Sep 1940, 8.

value'.[486] Instead of having a darkroom for the development of his shots, Hurley continued that 'Damien has been using bedrooms, lavatories and whatnots … The more I see the difficulties he has had to labour under, the more admiration I have for his work'.[487]

Prior to Hurley's arrival, Parer's early work in the Middle East had certainly satisfied the Department. While there was very little opportunity for him to cover any actual fighting, Parer's early short films captured the spirit that the Department sought to evoke in its propaganda by demonstrating the camaraderie of the Second AIF and documenting their activities following their embarkation from Australia. His film 'Camp Life at Palestine, February 1940', for example, depicted the training of the troops and the facilities at their new base, highlighting events such as marches and troop inspections.[488] His 'Anzac Day, Jerusalem 1940', meanwhile, highlighted the spiritual connection and similarities between the First and Second AIF (a theme explored in chapter eight), depicting a commemoration ceremony at the British War Cemetery in Jerusalem, followed by the Australian march through the city's streets.[489] This material would be of great value in creating the newsreels that the Department and the newsreel companies sought, providing a combination of news content, propaganda material and actuality footage for documentation purposes. In a report on the Department's activities published in May 1940, it was noted that 'Possibly the most important development in the Department's activities during the period under review is the liaison that has been established between the Australian troops in Palestine and the people of Australia'.[490] The photographs and films largely supplied by Parer were, it was noted, a major reason for this and were 'made available through the Department to the newspapers and news reel companies throughout the Commonwealth'.[491] In the month of May, 5,100 photographs had been physically printed and distributed by the Department from its official photographers.[492] With Silk in the field alongside Parer from May, the Department was confident that 'a regular supply of films and of photographs for the press will be ensured'.[493]

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[486] Frank Hurley letter to Les Brereton, 22 Sep 1940, SP109/14: 2P/6/1, 'Correspondence: Frank Hurley', NAA (Sydney).
[487] *Ibid*.
[488] Damien Parer, 'Camp Life at Palestine, February 1940', film, F01007, AWM; see also, Damien Parer, 'Camp Life at Gaza', Feb-Mar 1940, film, F01012, AWM.
[489] Damien Parer, 'Anzac Day, Jerusalem 1940', 25 Apr 1940, film, F01019, AWM.
[490] 'Department of Information Summary of Activities for Period Ended May 31 1940', SP195/1: 3/1/17, NAA (Canberra).
[491] *Ibid*.
[492] *Ibid*.
[493] 'Progress Reports of Department of Information Activities. To the Prime Minister', report 16 Apr 1940, SP195/1: 3/1/17, NAA (Canberra).

Figure 9: Damien Parer (left) with George Silk, outside Tobruk, c. August 1941 (AWM)

With such early success, it would have been hard for Hurley to arrive in the Middle East in September 1940 and immediately start criticising his new junior team members' efforts. In private, however, Hurley scorned the inexperience of Parer and Silk. Writing to his daughter's partner, his friend and fellow photographer Alexander Stewart, shortly after his arrival in the Middle East, Hurley stated that the two junior photographers:

> seem to have meandered in a rather haphazard way—Parer has worked hard but has no news sense. Silk is just an inexperienced hand that has a long way to go and much to learn. I do wish I had a thoroughly experienced pressman like yourself so that the still work would function without worry.[494]

Silk in particular struck Hurley as a professional liability. His inexperience aside, Silk had suffered a string of misfortunes soon after his arrival in the Middle East: he had been bitten by a rabies-infected dog, had a wisdom tooth and his appendix removed, suffered chronic diarrhoea, and had surgery for an obstructed bowel.[495] 'Silk is not strong', Hurley wrote to Brereton, 'and I don't like taking any further responsibility for his welfare'.[496] Commenting on this after the war, Maslyn Williams noted that Silk was just 'a boy' and 'didn't set out to annoy Frank, but he couldn't help but annoy him … being a jolly young fellow he was calling himself a professional photographer but in Frank's estimation he wasn't even fit to be the assistant in the dark room'.[497] Reflecting on Silk's abilities, Williams continued that 'George was much better than that … [he] was learning very fast [and] became world famous as an action photographer … he was a news man pure and simple.[498] Yet in Hurley's mind it was he who was the 'news man' who would have to fix the unit's approach to this aspect of their work. Ken Hall, the head of Cinesound Productions who had previously worked with Hurley in the film industry, attributed this attitude largely to Hurley's ego: 'He didn't believe anybody was really as good as Frank Hurley'.[499]

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[494] Frank Hurley letter to Alexander Stewart, c. Sep 1940, Alexander Stewart papers, 3DRL/7682, AWM.
[495] McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 360. See also *Australasian Photo-Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1 Mar 1941.
[496] Frank Hurley letter to Les Brereton, 26 Oct 1940, cited in McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 360.
[497] Maslyn Williams interviewed by Millar, 2582729, NLA.
[498] *Ibid*.
[499] Ken Hall interviewed by David Millar, 1981, Bib ID: 2582729, NLA.

In practice, however, it was Hurley who appeared to the rest of the unit to be lacking in news sense and outdated in his methods once things started to heat up in the Middle East from early 1941. He seemed more interested in making travelogues and photographing the local scenery than he did in military matters.[500] Writing to Stewart from Cairo in July 1941, for example, he stated that 'There is so much to do and so little time to do it in. I wish I could stroll around the country just making travelogues and studies of native life and so on. Military work becomes very lonesome … There is a sameness that takes all one's will to avoid repetition'.[501] In April of that year too, Hurley wrote that '[I] have been up Palestine way and that country just now is glorious. It is high spring and flowers and fields and groves are a joy to see. I wish I could forget khaki and tanks and planes'.[502] Parer, meanwhile, had increasingly found his stride following his filming of the naval aspect of the Battle of Bardia and the Australian advance on Derna in January 1941. The Unit's resultant film of the Bardia action was described by Hurley in the press as an 'historic document that the public should devour', though he admitted that 'with my big camera … it was difficult to work with shells zooming a cricket pitch away'.[503] Hurley's insistence on using his bulky equipment, particularly his favourite Debrie camera, slowed the Unit down in the field. 'He wouldn't use any kind of equipment that wasn't on a tripod … [and] would not use a hand camera', Williams recalled, 'It was almost impossible really to cover fast action with that kind of equipment'.[504] Parer, in contrast, 'used [his hand camera] almost as he used his eye'.[505] His portable Graflex camera, Alan Anderson claimed, 'was an extension of Damien's body'.[506]

Figure 10: Members of the Department of Information Film Unit in the Middle East, 1940. From top left, clockwise: Damien Parer, Frank Hurley, George Silk, Ron Maslyn Williams (NFSA)

[500] See, for example, Robert Dixon, "Shooting in Occupied Space: Frank Hurley in the Middle East, 1940-46", *History of Photography* 38, no. 1 (2014): 40-55.
[501] Frank Hurley letter to Alexander Stewart, 5 Jul 1941, Stewart papers, 3DRL/7682, AWM.
[502] Frank Hurley letter to Alexander Stewart, 16 Apr 1941, Stewart papers, 3DRL/7682, AWM.
[503] *Courier Mail*, 24 Jan 1941, 4.
[504] Maslyn Williams interviewed by Millar, 2582729, NLA.
[505] *Ibid*.
[506] Alan Anderson interviewed by David Millar, 1981, Bib ID: 2582729, NLA.

Silk particularly felt that Hurley was having a negative effect on the Unit's activities, believing his antiquated methods to be stifling his own work. 'I think that Frank and I just didn't see eye to eye in any possible way', he recalled after the war:

> He was dealing with … the big heavy movie cameras you put on a tripod, and I was dealing with a Contax or a Rolleiflex, and an Eyemo … he looked at me as a child, just toying in photography, because he couldn't understand anything but his own way of photography … he was of no help to me or Damien in what we were trying to do, which was the new wave. There's just no way the old guy could understand what we were trying to do.[507]

Clearly there was a significant clash of egos within the Unit, and it seems doubtful that Silk truly appreciated the sheer weight of Hurley's prior work. Hurley's attitude towards him seems to have been the primary reason for Silk's intense dislike of him and scorn for his outdated working methods. 'I felt all the time he was putting me down', Silk stated, 'he showed no faith in anything I did and I felt lost and far from home at times … I eventually got over it by simply just not being there, just taking off in a pick-up truck that I had and going out in the desert and looking for the fighting'.[508] This freewheeling approach led, for example, to Silk's extraordinary photographs of the aftermath of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, a major tank battle conducted during Operation Crusader in late November 1941. Despite their internal struggles, the Unit was clearly getting results for the Department. As early as February 1941 at a meeting of the Advisory War Council, the Minister for Information, H. S. Foll, stated that:

> there has been a big demand for the Australian films from Singapore and from America showing the exploits of the AIF at Sidi Barani [where Hurley had been the Unit's principal photographer] and Bardia. Members of the Council agreed that the screening of these films abroad would be an excellent idea and provide a splendid reply to the Italian propaganda that the loss of these places was relatively unimportant.[509]

For all Silk's talk of the 'new wave' and his struggles under Hurley, there were clearly possibilities for him to take the kind of photographs that I discussed in chapter five. It did not matter to the Department what relations were like within the Film Unit—so long as the material they sought was received, there was very little interaction between the two entities with regards to the day-to-day life of the Unit.

[507] Silk interviewed by McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[508] *Ibid*.
[509] Minutes of Advisory War Council meeting, 7 Feb 1941, A2680: 2/1940, NAA (Canberra).

Figure 11: Aftermath of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, November-December 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

It is clear, therefore, that Hurley on the one hand and Parer and Silk on the other were not only conflicting characters, but also contrasting in the way that they set about their work. While Hurley seemed increasingly interested in the natural landscape and native populations of the Middle East, Parer was solely interested in the Australian fighting man (a topic that will be discussed in detail in chapter eight). The ensuing clash of personalities seemed to some to be a certainty. The Department of Information photographer Bill Carty noted after the war that 'Parer wasn't getting along with him … I knew there'd be trouble as soon as he [Hurley] got over there because Parer was well established and I felt that as soon as he came in he'd want to take over, which he did … And this didn't suit Parer'.[510] Williams, meanwhile, recalled that Hurley:

> was the public relations man, the man who made a business out of filming and out of still work—that was his occupation. He wasn't concerned about who was winning the war in the sense that he had no moral concept [of it] … Parer was quite the opposite. Parer lived and died every time a soldier got wounded … [he] agonised over every one of them. This is what he tried to get to in his pictures … Every one of those men was a Galahad, a hero, a Lancelot.[511]

As Hurley did not share this mentality and increasingly sought to exert his control over the Unit, Parer was left increasingly frustrated and became rather petulant. Writing to Max

[510] Bill Carty interviewed by David Millar, 1981, Bib ID: 2582729, NLA.
[511] Maslyn Williams interviewed by Millar, 2582729, NLA.

Dupain and Olive Cotton, he complained that 'I find working with Hurley difficult. He's a good bloke in himself but unfortunately having worked so much on his own he cannot tolerate another man doing a responsible job of work—collaboration is not the order of the day. He must be number one on top all the time'.[512] Turning Hurley's criticism on himself, Parer continued that:

> [he] hasn't much news sense which is necessary to the job; he goes mad about bloody native boats, and mosques, & clouds (cumulus variety only), while the war correspondents lick us at the news stuff … He goes for big rugged scenery … & worries about "quality", and his imagination is limited—don't think he could ever produce something fine.[513]

Parer here seems to have forgotten the vast body of extraordinary work already produced by Hurley, but this is a reflection of his determination to get to the actual fighting and his perception that Hurley stood in the way of this. 'The novelty of our surroundings has worn off', he wrote to Marie in July 1940:

> and the once strange, exciting things have become part of daily routine … This has directly affected my filming which is lacking in freshness and vitality. The war correspondents and myself are constantly on the lookout for new material, and find it difficult to unearth any … We haven't honestly tried to build a true picture of the Australian soldier and the Australian Imperial Force, and its function. We all skim the surface and show only the external.[514]

Parer may have had a point when he accused Hurley of slowing down the Unit's activities. Soon after Parer had finally witnessed combat at Bardia and Derna, for example, Hurley called in the services of the entire Unit to cover Prime Minister Robert Menzies' tour of the Middle East in February 1941, en route to Britain.[515] While the battle of Beda Fomm was in motion in early February, Parer and Silk were confined to photographing Menzies as he inspected the troops, visited hospitals, and indulged himself in some amateur photography. The only Australian-employed war correspondent to be present at Beda Fomm was Chester Wilmot.[516] So comprehensive was the Unit's coverage of Menzies' visit that its younger members suspected that Hurley was attempting to, in the words of historian Neil McDonald, 'secure for himself a long overdue imperial honour, suspicions confirmed when he was awarded an OBE in the next King's Birthday Honours'.[517]

Hurley's domineering attitude had been further displayed by his imposition of a curfew on the Unit's members whenever they were in Cairo. Having procured an apartment for the Unit in the city in October 1940, Hurley was, Alan Anderson recalled, 'a loner, and this is where

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[512] Parer letter to Max Dupain and Olive Cotton, 14 Dec 1940, Parer papers, MLMSS 1097, SLNSW.
[513] *Ibid*.
[514] Parer letter to Marie Cotter, 9 Jul 1940, Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/4, SLNSW.
[515] An account of Menzies' visit appears in A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life: Volume I 1894-1943* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), 318-320.
[516] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 99.
[517] *Ibid.*, 100.

he was not the ideal person to be the leader … he did try at times to treat us like the troops. One of the ways he did this was to put a curfew [on us] … which for grown men was a bit ridiculous. He was concerned, I think, with our morals'.[518] Such was the miserable attitude around the apartment, Anderson explained, that there were 'only three occasions that I can recall that the five of us all got together … for a unit that was concentrated in one flat, it was amazing that we didn't get together much more often'.[519] On long trips together outside of Cairo, Hurley would conduct conversations with Anderson through their driver, despite sitting within inches of each other. On one occasion, Hurley deliberately embarrassed Anderson by struggling to move heavy camera equipment while Anderson chatted with some senior military personnel. Anderson looked around and saw:

> this man old enough to be my father, struggling to shift the camera … while this young, lazy so-and-so is wasting time talking to someone, and I'm quite sure he did it deliberately to humiliate me … that was the time I used to hate him because it was unnecessary and he knew it … that was the sort of thing that no good leader would ever have done.[520]

There was, therefore, an unpleasant atmosphere within the Unit which resulted in Parer and Silk in particular seeking to limit their involvement with Hurley and undertake assignments on their own. This was the case when Parer, Silk and Williams covered the Greek campaign in April 1941 while Hurley worked in Palestine. Hurley then headed to Tobruk with Anderson, where an argument ensued over Hurley's staging of a photograph of a downed German Junker aircraft. Writing to his parents about this incident, Anderson noted that 'As usual, we faked a few shots of men with rifles and machine-guns repelling an attack … We also faked a shot of a plane that had been brought down … by putting oil and petrol under the motor and lighting it, which gave the impression that the plane had just been brought down in flames. How easily a reputation for bravery is built up'.[521]

Figure 12: Hurley and Anderson's staged shot of a downed German Junker, April 1941 (AWM)

[518] Anderson interviewed by Millar, 2582729, NLA.
[519] *Ibid*.
[520] *Ibid*.
[521] Cited in McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 124.

Whether this kind of staged shot was historically valid or not given the documentation aspect of the Unit's work is an interesting question. Shots like those described by Anderson certainly fulfilled the Department's propaganda brief and provided Australian audiences with an idea of what the war actually looked like in the Middle East. Reporting on Hurley and Anderson's work in Tobruk, for example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed that 'They have brought back a vivid glimpse of the lives, the trials, and the daily dangers of the men who grimly hold on despite the insistent pressure of Axis forces … In Tobruk itself the camera finds the usual cheerful, casual Australian, going about his daily duties as if there wasn't an enemy for 10,000 miles'.[522] The fact remains though that a considerable number of the images being consumed in Australia were not authentic depictions of the war. In staging shots, Hurley likely believed that he was conveying a truthful and dramatic impression of conflict. As the photographer John Kaplan has argued, those photojournalists who engage in staging often claim that it 'makes it easier for their photographs to communicate more intensely, thus revealing a "greater truth"'.[523] Yet, as John Taylor has written in a discussion concerning Robert Capa's famous photograph of a dying soldier in the Spanish Civil War—the authenticity of which has been routinely questioned—staging 'the *kind* of thing that happens in battles undermines the credibility of documentary photography "as a source of indexical evidence about events"'.[524] If Capa did stage the photograph, Taylor argues, it 'destroys the basic truth of the event [and] impairs Capa's reputation for witnessing; it falsifies the emotions which are stirred by authentic moments'.[525]

The authenticity of the shots captured by Hurley and the rest of the Film Unit, therefore, did not seem to matter so much to the Department as much as their propaganda value. Though these recreations did provide the Australian public with an impression of the conflict, questionable means to do this were certainly being used at times. Outside of war, this kind of practice would generally be deemed unethical, but this was overlooked by a governmental body desperate for as many pictures as possible, particularly those which could be used for propagandistic ends. As historian Anna Efstathiadou has written, official Australian photographers like Hurley and Parer 'constructed culturally specific representations, aiming to balance elements of photo-realism and documentary recording with the guidelines given to them by the institutions (government, army, press) that had commissioned them to do the job. Equally, since this visual material drew public attention, its controlled selection and circulation was required in order to communicate official views, to influence public opinion and to promote public support for war policies'.[526]

[522] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 Jun 1941, 18.
[523] John Kaplan, "Ethical Photojournalism: Its Authenticity and Impact" in *The Focal Encyclopedia of Photography: Digital Imaging, Theory and Applications, History, and Science*, ed. Michael R. Peres (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2013 edition), 447.
[524] John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (NY: New York University Press, 1998), 58.
[525] *Ibid.*, 58.
[526] Anna Efstathiadou, "Australian Official War Photography from the Campaign in Greece, 1941", *Balkan Studies* 49 (2014), 90.

This push for a wide range of visual material resulted in an impressive scope of coverage which fulfilled the Department's desire for propaganda, news and documentation material. When the entire Unit found itself in Syria and Lebanon in June and July 1941, the combination of the work done there by Parer, Silk and Hurley complemented each other's approaches. While Parer and Silk captured numerous action shots and documented sites of strategic significance, Hurley, who remained in the area until late into the year, largely focused on scenic photographs and life behind the front lines. This included, for example, his notable shots of the short-lived AIF Ski Unit in Syria and Lebanon.

Figure 13: Australian troops advancing in Lebanon, July 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

It is clear, therefore, that the work conducted by the Film Unit throughout 1941 amounted to a comprehensive photographic archive of most aspects of Australian activity in the Middle East. An abundance of material was supplied for newsreels which millions of Australians saw. In a report on the reach of their films in 1941, the Department recorded that their films, largely comprised of material supplied by the Photographic Unit, were being 'exhibited in over 13,000 theatres throughout the Commonwealth and these theatres have a weekly audience of three million people'.[527] In a review of the Department's activities in 1941, meanwhile, it was noted with satisfaction that:

> A cinema and photographic unit is maintained in the Middle East … Many thousands of feet of film depicting activities of the AIF, RAAF and RAN has been released through Australian produced newsreels, thus ensuring rapid and widespread exhibition in public theatres. On several occasions, such as the capture of Bardia and Benghazi, the siege of Tobruk and the Armistice ceremonies at Beirut, newsreels devoted their complete reel to the items provided by this Department. Middle East

[527] Department of Information report on Films Division, 1941, SP195/1: 3/1/17, NAA (Canberra).

> material is also supplied to the British Department of Information and to the United States and Canada, where it is well received and widely distributed.[528]

It did not matter that there had been an endless stream of internal strife within the Unit that supplied the material, and this was most likely recognised by the members of the Unit itself. When the 6th and 7th Divisions were withdrawn from the Middle East in early 1942 to head to the Pacific, the entirety of the Unit left with them with the exception of Hurley. With the benefit of distance and time, the group reflected on its activities with a great deal of pride and, with the exception of Silk, came to view Hurley with some sympathy. With the younger members of the Unit now gone, Hurley was left alone in the Middle East and became increasingly lonely and, from the Department's point of view, irrelevant. During the Second Battle of El Alamein, for example, he had requested support from the Department in the form of new assistants but was completely ignored. 'I have not heard from the Department for many moons', he wrote to its Secretary in November 1942, 'and I don't know if film is even arriving'.[529] Having become so fed up of his employment with the Department, Hurley took up a job with the British Ministry of Information in 1943.

Faced with the loneliness of his new circumstances, Hurley cast his mind to his former colleagues, writing to them with nostalgia. In a letter to Parer in August 1943 he praised 'the superlative job you did over here and the grand things you are continuing to do in New Guinea', noting that 'I wish you and Ron were here. We could make a unit to carry on in a big way. There is nothing in the field to touch the old unit. We certainly got results'.[530] In a display of genuine warmth and affection, Hurley concluded the letter: 'Take a survivor's advice. They only say "yes a gallant chap—great pity". So don't be too brave'.[531] Hurley was, it seems, realising what he had lost with the departure of his younger team members. Writing to Williams about Hurley's letter, Parer stated that 'You will be very surprised to know that I have already answered his letter. Yes, his words cut me to the quick … Frank is definitely lonely … Do you know I typed him five pages. Gave him all the news I could think of'.[532] Certainly there was a recognition from the Unit's members that their work for the Department of Information had real value and was more significant than their internal feuds. Writing to Parer in early 1944, Hurley asserted that:

> As you say, we had our quibbles and quabbles, but the old unit has never been matched as a team in this or in any other war theatre. I pass 13 Midan Ismalia [the Unit's old apartment in Cairo] several times a week and I often wish the clock could be turned back three years. I know I was a surly old bugger but in the end it didn't do any of us much harm. I never did have much time I must admit for Silk whose instability and unloyalty provoked this condition. Anyhow I am glad to hear he is going well and getting over his convalescing and amorous splashes.[533]

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[528] Department of Information, Review of Activities and Estimated Expenditure 1941/42, SP195/1: /3/1/17, NAA (Canberra).
[529] Hurley letter to Bob Hawes, 16 Nov 1942, SP109/16, box 106, NAA (Sydney).
[530] Hurley letter to Parer, 12 Aug 1943, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 65, NLA.
[531] *Ibid*.
[532] Parer letter to Maslyn Williams, 14 Nov 1943, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 10, folder 65, NLA.
[533] Hurley letter to Parer, 7 Jan 1944, Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/5, SLNSW.

Anderson, meanwhile, wrote to Hurley in August 1943 that 'I often think of the paths we travelled together … We must have a reunion of the unit as soon as possible after the war and have a really interesting evening talking over old times. The others have all expressed the same desire'.[534]

Hurley's nostalgia for the 'old days' long after they had passed is reflective of the calibre of work that the Department of Information's Film Unit produced together in the Middle East in the years 1940-1942. Though they were disorganised at times, rarely in the same place at the same time, and often operated amidst an atmosphere of hostility, the material that they supplied was immensely valuable. The Department was provided with excellent propaganda and publicity material, the Australian War Memorial received an exemplary pictorial record of Australian activity in the Middle East, and the newsreel companies were supplied with their share of 'hot news'. One of the primary aims of the Department was, as Paul Hasluck noted in a volume of the Official History, the 'conscious process of building up the strength of the nation and mobilising its resources on the mental as well as the material side'.[535] It recognised that the pictorial record of the war was a significant contributor to this in providing the Australian public with a visual insight into how the war was being fought and how their country was contributing to this in the Middle East.

In addition to this, as will be seen further in chapter eight, Parer and Silk developed their skills significantly in the Middle East and soon began to add valuable substance not only to the Australian pictorial record of conflict, but also to the Anzac legend. Hurley may have been 'behind the times' when he took charge of the Unit, but it certainly did not harm the work that Parer and Silk produced. As millions of Australians witnessed their material in theatres around the country, a strong sense of what it was that their countrymen were doing in the Middle East was conveyed to them. At moments like these the war became eminently more imaginable to those back in Australia, thanks in part to the agreement in place between the Government and the newsreel companies over the sharing and distribution of images, but also to those in the field risking their lives to document the conflict.

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[534] Anderson letter to Hurley, 22 Aug 1943, Alan Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.
[535] Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People: 1939-1941* (Canberra: AWM, 1952), 201.

The Sound of War: Chester Wilmot and the ABC Field Unit in the Middle East, 1940-1942

Much as Frank Hurley had clashed with his younger colleagues, there was a similar rift within the ranks of the ABC's Field Unit. It had originally been intended that Hurley would join the Field Unit as its commentator under the command of Captain Lawrence H. Cecil, a veteran of the First World War. When the Department of Information, however, requested Hurley's services for its Film Unit, the ABC could not reasonably refuse and instead had to look for a replacement. 'The Commission will be pleased to release Captain Hurley', the Acting General Manager of the ABC, Thomas Bearup, wrote to the Department, 'provided that Mr. Chester Wilmot, who is at present attached to your department, is made available to go abroad with our unit in place of Captain Hurley'.[536]

Wilmot had been a growing presence on ABC radio in recent years and had cultivated a reputation within the organisation for his abilities. Charles Moses, the ABC's General Manager until his enlistment in the AIF in May 1940, later noted that 'Wilmot was coming to my attention as a man who was a good describer of events and had the making I felt of being a good war correspondent'.[537] Wilmot was also, however, notably arrogant and headstrong, resulting in repeated confrontations with the older Cecil, who had been an actor and ABC radio producer in the inter-war period. Despite their clash of personalities, however, the ABC Field Unit was remarkably prolific, thanks in part to the combination of Wilmot's determination to 'get the story' and Cecil's quietly efficient management. 'Radio was a medium that came into its own in the Second World War', Greg McLaughlin has written, 'and for the first time allowed people to hear the sounds of battle, to experience something of the war at first hand'.[538] This emotional power of radio was something which the ABC capitalised on during the war.

Upon its foundation in June 1940, the ABC Field Unit was provided with a relatively straightforward brief. Primarily, the Unit was expected to supply audio material '(a) by means of recordings [in the field]; (b) by direct rebroadcasting of programme matter relating to the activities of the Australian Forces to which the unit is attached; (c) in the form of scripts'.[539] On top of this, the Field Unit would also be responsible for making ABC programmes broadcast in Australia available to members of the AIF overseas 'by means of public address loud speakers'.[540] The field recordings would largely be in the hands of Wilmot and Cecil, while the technical aspects of their work and broadcasts for troops would be the responsibility of the Unit's engineers and technicians, Bill MacFarlane, Reg Boyle and Leo Gallway.

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[536] T. W. Bearup letter to Director-General of Information, 1 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 48, NLA.
[537] Sir Charles Moses interviewed by Neil McDonald, 1986, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 6, folder 7a, NLA.
[538] McLaughlin, *The War Correspondent*, 64.
[539] J. T. Fitzgerald, Secretary of Army, letter to T. W. Bearup, Acting General Manager of the ABC, 26 Jun 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 48, NLA.
[540] *Ibid*.

As this method of reporting the war for Australian audiences was, of course, unprecedented, there was no set path that the Unit was expected to follow. Rather, to a significant extent, the nature of their work would be defined 'on the job' once they had a better understanding of conditions on the ground. Writing to his sister and brother-in-law shortly before the Unit departed Australia for the Middle East in September 1940, Wilmot noted that 'we are taking with us mobile recording vans and so will be able to make records in the field … it should be a wonderful experience, as we will be moving about wherever things are happening'.[541] The finer details of exactly how events would be reported on, however, at this time remained ambiguous.

Soon after their arrival in Gaza in October 1940, Wilmot later reported that the Unit's approach to their work began to take firmer shape. It was soon decided that Wilmot would focus on 'operational broadcasts' in and around the main areas of fighting, while Cecil would record 'camp broadcasts' to include interviews with a wide array of service personnel from behind the front lines.[542] 'The result', Wilmot continued, 'was that we operated virtually as two self-contained sections, and in the end, the control which he exercised over my work was virtually limited to deciding the field of operations in which I should work'.[543] Wilmot's reports were intended to inform the listener of military operations, giving the view from the front lines and describing the nature of the fighting that Australians were involved in, while Cecil's interviews provided further colour to Australians' experiences in the region and what life was like away from the fighting. Reflecting on the arrangement between Wilmot and himself, Cecil reflected that:

> No definite instructions were set forth [by the ABC]: I more or less had to use my initiative, devise what was to be done and by whom, as no one was fully aware of the circumstances and conditions to be encountered … I gave [Wilmot] great freedom of action, encouraged him to express himself and extended to him all the best opportunities … So began our work in the Western desert with both Mr. Wilmot and I working independently under my direction.[544]

What appears to have been the main source of confusion in the initial activities of the Field Unit was the extent to which they would provide 'actuality broadcasts' and feature programmes as opposed to 'the news' of the war. In a letter to his mentor William Macmahon Ball shortly after the conclusion of Operation Compass in February 1941, for example, Wilmot complained that:

> So far as I can gather they [the ABC] want more feature programmes—more actuality broadcasts—but they also want news. If they want news … then it will take one man nearly all his time to gather the news when the campaign is moving like this one did. I

541 Wilmot letter to Jean and George Bemis, 12 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 2, folder 15a, NLA.
542 Wilmot letter to T. W. Bearup, 26 Mar 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.
543 *Ibid*.
544 Lawrence H. Cecil report on activities of ABC Field Unit, 8 Apr 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 29, NLA.

> found that I was following the action—or in it—or else interviewing people all day long—that I then got back to our dugout after dark having driven on an average about 50-70 miles over trackless desert mostly. I then had dinner, slept for about an hour, got up and wrote till say 2am, slept till 6.30 am, recorded my talk, and then saw it despatched.[545]

Despite Wilmot's frustrations, however, the ABC seem to have given little indication that he and the Unit were being looked to for extensive news coverage. Rather than viewing itself as in competition with newspapers for 'hot news', the ABC believed its role to be one of bringing the war home to Australians, providing an extra layer of descriptive detail to generic war coverage combined with the sounds of the battlefield. Its broadcasts would, the Commission hoped, serve to bolster morale on the home front and contribute to the Government's propaganda effort.[546] Writing to Wilmot in February 1941, for example, Bearup suggested possible titles for feature pieces: "Who was the first man to enter Tobruk?", "Is there a taxi-driver who now drives a tank?" and "What does it feel like to drive a tank at 40 m.p.h. across the desert?" were all suggested ideas.[547] Bearup made the concerns of the ABC quite clear later in the year, writing to Cecil that 'an actual recording from the spot has a value which the cable report, even if it does not arrive first, can never have. This illustrates of course the desirability of concentrating on stories behind the news rather than on news itself, and these stories gain tremendously … if they present the actual participants in person'.[548] It was the personal nature of these broadcasts, complete with the voices of those who had witnessed, taken part in or dealt with the aftermath of the action, which the Commission was concerned with putting at the front and centre of its broadcasts. 'In jobs like these', Bearup continued, 'you leave the press miles behind'.[549]

Despite this, however, Wilmot still sought to get to the story before his fellow war correspondents. This stemmed from his obsession with knowing the full story and gathering as many facts as possible—a determination which he had always displayed in his pre-war journalism career. Following his coverage of the fighting around Derna in January-February 1941, he wrote that 'Throughout the Libyan campaign I worked entirely on my own and I found it paid. In fact on three consecutive days I managed to scoop the Australian pressmen by 24 hours, with quite important stories—e.g. fall of Derna, our smashing of Italian resistance just west of Derna'.[550] Continuing, Wilmot complained that 'I would feel better about the whole thing if the ABC were to give even the slightest inkling of what they want'.[551] This complaint was unfounded since Bearup had been in regular contact with the Unit throughout 1941 stating his desire for positive feature stories. The ABC was, after all, as historian Ken Inglis has written, guided by 'official hands' during the war 'to present

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545 Wilmot letter to William Macmahon Ball, 28 Feb 1941, William Macmahon Ball papers, MS 7851, box 4, folder 29, NLA.

546 Kay Saunders, "'An Instrument of Strategy': Propaganda, Public Policy and the Media in Australia During the Second World War", *War & Society* 15, no. 2 (1997): 78-79.

547 T. W. Bearup letter to Wilmot, 25 Feb 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 48, NLA.

548 Extract from T. W. Bearup letter to Lawrence H. Cecil, cited in Cecil letter to Wilmot, 16 Sep 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.

549 *Ibid*.

550 Wilmot letter to family, 25 Feb 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 26, NLA.

551 *Ibid*.

information and opinion in ways intended to heighten the war effort'.[552] Virtually all their broadcast activity was subject to approval by the Department of Information.[553] The actuality and feature broadcasts were, therefore, viewed as important contributions to the effort to maintain and bolster home front morale.

Having given a clear idea of the work they most appreciated from the Unit's early efforts in the Middle East, Wilmot and Cecil were largely given a free hand by the ABC. Cecil certainly understood this, writing in a report of the Unit's activities that the primary concern was to get 'the news behind the news, and endeavouring to get the full authentic story, both the highlight and its background', meaning that they 'were not forced to dash into print prematurely about an action that had barely started. We wanted the true story, the full story, and generally this proved the most graphic story'.[554]

Figure 14: Chester Wilmot in Palestine, 12 July 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

To get these stories, the Field Unit was required to travel some quite extraordinary distances. When seeking to gather the facts about an event in its immediate aftermath, Cecil later noted that the Unit would have to travel:

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[552] Inglis, *This is the ABC*, 79.
[553] *Ibid.*, 78.
[554] Lawrence H. Cecil, report on activities of ABC Field Unit, 8 Apr 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 29, NLA.

> fifteen miles to see Colonel "So and So", he tells us of a Lieutenant ten miles away who had done outstanding work, he tells us of his Sergeant who was with him and must be seen. The Sergeant is three miles down a wadi: No, you can't take your truck more than a mile down the wadi, you must walk the rest … Then we visit the next Brigade and having to retrace our steps and come forward again along an entirely different track, we travel perhaps thirty or forty miles, that is when we ultimately find it, for immediately after a battle nobody knows where anybody is.[555]

Having gathered the facts of an event, Wilmot wrote a script describing it which was then recorded. Wilmot regularly wrote in the Unit's truck where he often remained, as Cecil told Australian listeners in a broadcast, 'until the small hours of the morning, typing a script to be recorded before breakfast and sent post-haste on its way to Cairo' from where the talk would be 'relayed to London by radiophone, re-recorded there, and sent by short wave transmitter to Australia'.[556] This was gruelling work for Wilmot, who by early 1941 was already averaging a distance of 140 miles travelled per day.[557] In addition to this, he was taking significant risks to witness events for himself, building in the process a detailed knowledge of the battlefield, military tactics, and what it felt like to be under fire. Wilmot described at length in his diary why he ventured to the front lines so regularly, writing that:

> If you are able to describe accurately and graphically the actions in which the troops take part you must see the ground over which they have to fight … and you must get some idea of the amount of fire which goes both ways. Otherwise you have no idea what really happened. You are just stringing together a lot of words … The test which I apply is this—"Could I face it if I had to sit beside a man who took part in that action and listen to my broadcast?" … Of course often you have to take the other man's story, often you have to work from second hand sources, but now because of the experience I have had in front-lines and bombed areas, I can usually tell whether the man telling me the story of an action is telling the truth or not.[558]

As discussed in chapter four, it was partly Wilmot's attuned historical consciousness which drove him to work in such a way. By witnessing events for himself, he believed that his work would have greater veracity and historical significance than the work of his fellow correspondents. Within the world of war reporting, this belief that risk-taking imbues the correspondent's work with greater legitimacy has long been an accepted truth. As Brian Creech has written, 'a reporter's exposure to risks has long determined the value of their work' within the profession and among the wider public.[559] Citing the example of Second World War newsreels, Creech argues that they 'were legitimated as journalistic forms partially because the final product intuited an individual's proximity to danger'.[560] By

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[555] *Ibid*.
[556] Lawrence H. Cecil broadcast, "How Recordings were made and Despatched during the Libyan Campaign", 1941, accession number: S01999, AWM.
[557] ABC Weekly, 1 Mar 1941, 4.
[558] Wilmot diary, 2 Jan 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.
[559] Brian Creech, "Bearing the Cost to Witness: The Political Economy of Risk in Contemporary Conflict and War Reporting", *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 4 (2017): 570.
[560] *Ibid.*, 570.

consistently exposing himself to the danger of the frontlines, Wilmot hoped that his work would be hailed as some of the most accomplished of his generation of war correspondents.

Wilmot took excessive pride in this risk-taking and the resultant accuracy that he believed this gave his reporting, actively contrasting himself to some of his peers. 'I know that most correspondents think that military knowledge is an embarrassment', he wrote in his diary, 'they prefer to write in blissful ignorance. As Alan Moorehead once said: "If you know too much it spoils the story" … Alan writes a very readable story, but his stories have only a casual acquaintance with truth. On the other hand I believe that truth is more dramatic than fiction—especially if you get the whole truth'.[561] Wilmot's arrogance certainly intensified during his time as a war correspondent alongside a general sense of superiority that he felt over many of his peers. This likely stemmed from his working methods and extensive knowledge of the battlefield, alongside his privileged upbringing and achievements prior to the war. When discussing the Australian correspondent James Aldridge, for example, Wilmot noted that:

> You will only be believed as a correspondent if you have people's confidence. People have confidence in those whom they believe get their stories from the front. You can establish this belief in one of two ways—you can be like Aldridge and have a good press agent who will tell the right sort of lie about you and you can dress your stories up as front-line eye-witness stuff, or else you can get that belief slowly by building up a reputation and by demonstrating what you do. The first way may succeed with the public but it will never fool the troops.[562]

Discussing the Unit's engineer, Reg Boyle, meanwhile, Wilmot was remarkably pretentious, writing in his diary that 'he is a typical product of a technical education—has had no sense of values which cannot be estimated in mathematical or mechanical terms—he has no ordinary human warmth—even his piano playing is soulless and technical … he lacks the liberal education which would give him the ability to control men and to win their respect. He is crude in manner, uncouth in speech'.[563] Reading statements like these, one would not be surprised to learn that Wilmot had attended one of the most prestigious private schools in the country.

Far from distinguishing himself in these writings and comments about others, Wilmot comes across as childish and having an over-inflated sense of self-worth which directly affected his relationships with others. He was himself conscious of his many character flaws. 'When I take my intellectual self apart and look at my personal self', he wrote to his then-girlfriend:

> I am overcome with shame and humility … I can see all the things which other people dislike and rile about … I don't think I ever consciously ride roughshod over other people. In so far as I do, I do it without really knowing that I am doing it at all, and this makes it far worse, far harder to conquer, far harder to control, because not only

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561 Wilmot diary, 2 Jan 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.
562 *Ibid.*
563 Wilmot diary, 2 Sep 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.

am I unconscious of the fact that I am rude to people, but I am also unconscious of their unfavourable reactions … I am so absorbed in what I want and what I think and what I feel that I am not concerned with what other people want and think and feel. If I were not so self-centred then I would automatically sense their reactions.[564]

Wilmot, it seems, used his undoubted commitment to and fascination with his work to justify his often unpalatable behaviour. None knew this better than Cecil, whose leadership and decision-making were routinely questioned by Wilmot. During his coverage of the fighting around Derna in February 1941, for example, Wilmot began to voice his frustration with Cecil's working methods. In a manner reminiscent of Parer and Silk's criticisms of Hurley, Wilmot wrote to his father that Cecil was:

> a tired man who has had no experience of organising a unit like this … I feel most dissatisfied with the work of the unit, for I am sure that we could do a lot more, if only Lawrence would stir himself. Since we arrived over here in October he has made one 20 minute programme on his own. He directed my scripts of both Bethlehems and a feature called "Disembarkation". He was asked by the BBC to do a monthly "Greetings Home" Programme. He made the first, but slipped on the second and we have probably lost our good will by now'.[565]

He failed to realise, however, that Cecil was allowing him the perfect freedom to produce the kind of material that Wilmot sought to create for the ABC. Wilmot ventured to Bardia, Derna, Tobruk, Greece, Syria, Lebanon and many more areas of conflict precisely because Cecil allowed him a free hand to approach his work in the way that Wilmot desired. This work, as will soon be discussed, had a real impact in Australia, yet Wilmot seemed to be solely focused on the supposed hardships that he had to endure under Cecil's leadership. Writing to Cecil from Syria in June 1941, Wilmot reeled off a long rambling letter complaining that he was not consulted enough on the Unit's movements. Recounting an incident concerning a proposed trip to Damascus before he had had a chance to send off a batch of recordings, he protested that 'it would be easier if proposed movements were discussed before you reach your decision. Then I would not be put in the invidious position of having to argue what I believe are in the interests of the unit against your decision already made … I would have failed in my duty to the Unit if I had not brought up the question of urgent recordings when you made the decision to go to Damascus'.[566]

Predictably, Cecil did not take kindly to such an attack, replying that 'you are a difficult person with whom to discuss. It has always appeared to me that you "discuss" not to arrive at some found conclusion but that your idea shall be carried out. If ever I am in doubt I ask your opinion and I have never failed to listen to any proposition you have made'.[567] Cecil was understandably hurt by Wilmot's letter, believing that he had facilitated Wilmot's reporting at every turn. 'I give you considerable freedom of action', he wrote, 'I hope and believe such

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[564] Wilmot letter to Edith Wilmot, 5 Mar 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 26, NLA.
[565] Wilmot letter to father, 2 Feb 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 26, NLA.
[566] Wilmot letter to Cecil, 29 Jun 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.
[567] Cecil letter to Wilmot, 29 Jun 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.

freedom will not be abused when occasions arise that I have to ask for some specific thing … I consider you of all the [war correspondents] … the outstanding [one]'.[568] Giving him a warning, Cecil concluded his response by advising Wilmot to 'remember your position in this Unit is the same as it was when you left Australia'.[569] Strong as his response was, it seems that Cecil was struggling to contain the younger man.

Wilmot was, after all, relentless in his pursuit of military knowledge and had little time for those whom he perceived to be obstructing him. Alan Moorehead, who he had so strongly criticised for his supposed lack of battlefield understanding, later recalled that 'what struck us about Chester was that he seemed more like a staff officer than a reporter. He was concerned not so much about the story he was to get as the very battle itself, and would pore over maps and get forward as often as he could … When it was all over and the rest of us were utterly tired of war, Chester's enthusiasm for it never went'.[570] Wilmot was, he continued, 'absolutely single-minded' and would 'brush people aside if they did not know about or couldn't help in what he was doing … whatever he wanted to do just came first'.[571]

Relations within the Unit came close to breaking point in November 1941 while Wilmot was in Tobruk. Writing again to Cecil, Wilmot lodged a 'formal protest against the conditions' in which he was working, noting that repairs to his recording equipment came too slowly and that he held Cecil largely responsible for this.[572] Wilmot claimed that Cecil's tricky relationship with the Unit's engineer, Reg Boyle, was the principal reason for the delays, writing that 'I feel that it is most unfortunate that the personal feud between you and Mr. Boyle should have been allowed to stand in the way of the Unit's best interests … The result is that I am seriously hampered in my work'.[573] Given Wilmot's own deep intolerance of and fraught relationship with Boyle, this would appear to be a quite astonishing display of hypocrisy. Cecil pointed this out to Wilmot, replying that 'Amazement was my reaction on receiving your letter' and criticising his 'childish' and 'vitriolic' statements.[574] 'When will you learn that I am in control of this unit', he continued:

> How dare you say that it is unfortunate that the personal feud between Mr. Boyle and myself stands in the way of the unit's interests. There is no personal feud between Mr. Boyle and myself and as for constant antagonism—really—might it not be better to reserve that phrase for your own relations with Mr. Boyle? … Why must you criticise and tell people how to do their jobs? … why attack me? I am not neglecting my job; I have problems and difficulties with which to contend that though you are not in a position to fully grasp, still you should have enough understanding to refrain from such sweeping criticism.[575]

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568 *Ibid*.
569 *Ibid*.
570 Alan Moorehead interviewed by Alan Wood, Mar 1955, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 2, NLA.
571 *Ibid*.
572 Wilmot letter to Cecil, 24 Nov 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.
573 *Ibid*.
574 Cecil letter to Wilmot, 6 Dec 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.
575 *Ibid*.

There was, therefore, an unpleasant working environment within the Field Unit which was largely of Wilmot's own making. Yet, for all the animosity alongside the difficulties faced by the Unit in the field, not least of which was the sheer amount of distance that had to be travelled to obtain and despatch recordings, the material that was produced was having a notable impact in Australia. If we consider the sheer sum of material which was produced by Wilmot and Cecil it is quite evident that their work had significant historical value as well as personal value to the contemporary Australian audience. By the time they returned to Australia in early 1942, Wilmot had produced around 175 recordings and scripts, while Cecil had recorded the voices of between seven and eight thousand service personnel, many of whom featured in his regular *Voices from Overseas* feature for the ABC, alongside other talks, actualities and sound effects.[576] For the first time in Australia, the voices of Australians currently on active service could be heard inside the living rooms of their friends and families at home. This was, in essence, the primary goal of the Field Unit, which sought, in Wilmot's words, to bring 'the news from the front-line to the fireside'.[577]

It was during the Second World War that the ability of radio to provide an emotive dimension to war reportage was seized upon. The broadcasts by the American correspondent Ed Murrow, for instance, according to historian Mike Conway, went 'beyond the current facts and dug into the emotion of the moment'.[578] This certainly was achieved to a very considerable extent for Australian audiences through broadcasts like *Voices from Overseas*. Writing to Cecil in August 1941, Wilmot informed him that 'Someone wrote to The Sun Pic. and said that all mothers and wives and families should be grateful to the ABC Unit who have risked their lives to bring our menfolk's voices back to us'.[579] Rather than merely describing events, the nature of the broadcasts, complete with interviews with participants and the sounds of war, meant that listeners were provided with a deeply personal and intimate portrait of the ongoing conflict. As historian Lesley Johnson has noted, during the inter-war period in Australia, radio programmes increasingly adopted a 'natural' and 'human' style 'in which a sense of intimacy, of familiarity, was deemed good radio. Interviews and discussions were claimed to be preferable to talks'.[580] The personal nature of the recordings made by Wilmot and Cecil, particularly those which featured soldiers' voices, were therefore building on this established practice, conveying the personal element of war to Australian audiences.

During one of his broadcasts, for example, Wilmot interviewed a soldier named Paddy Turnbull. Being particularly pleased with the Turnbull interview, the ABC tracked down his father's address, directly contacting him so that he was aware that his son's voice would be

[576] Lawrence H. Cecil report on activities of ABC Field Unit, 8 Apr 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 29, NLA.
[577] *ABC Weekly*, 2 May 1942, 15.
[578] Mike Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s* (London: Peter Lang, 2009), 100.
[579] Wilmot letter to Cecil, 5 Aug 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 49, NLA.
[580] Lesley Johnson, "The Intimate Voice of Australian Radio", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 3, no. 1 (1983): 44-45.

featured on the radio.[581] ‘It is a most interesting item’, Bearup wrote to Wilmot, ‘and you are to be congratulated on the way you “carried” Turnbull through it’.[582] ‘There is no doubt’, Bearup noted in a subsequent letter, ‘that the personal contact achieved by the very fact of the men themselves speaking pleases the people here … The increase in the number of interviews and actualities is very gratifying and I hope that you will be able to let us have even more’.[583] This was clearly the kind of material that was most sought after by the ABC, who recognised its emotional pull factor. As informative as Wilmot’s battlefield reporting was, it was when he directly engaged with the troops that his broadcasts had their greatest intimacy.

This is particularly evident in his broadcast ‘Concert in a cave at Tobruk’, which has subsequently been added to the National Film and Sound Archive’s *Sounds of Australia* collection, which preserves recordings with ‘cultural, historical and aesthetic significance and relevance’.[584] Recorded in an ammunition cave in October 1941, Wilmot’s recording of 400 AIF personnel singing songs like *The Legion of the Lost* and performing musical instrumentals is a unique capture during the siege of Tobruk. The recording was exceptionally well received in Australia, presenting as it did the spirited endurance of the men at Tobruk in a way that was not focused on military heroics. ‘Despite trying conditions’, the *Argus* reported, ‘AIF men besieged at Tobruk have produced an entertaining concert, which was broadcast by the AIF field unit, under Chester Wilmot’.[585] So highly thought of was the recording that it was arranged for a copy to be sent to King George VI, with *Smith’s Weekly* reporting that:

> Chester, who has been at Tobruk for more than a month … did an historic piece of work by recording this concert … Since the concert was broadcast on Sunday morning, letters have been pouring into the Commission, and the telephone wires have been running hot asking for a repeat of the concert, which, more than any printed word can do, shows the splendid spirit of the men at Tobruk.[586]

There was, therefore, a distinct sense that recordings such as the Tobruk cave concert captured a unique moment in time, preserving for all to hear a side of the conflict not ordinarily conveyed to Australian audiences. This idea of the preservation of something that would otherwise be lost was also applicable in a more solemn sense. When Wilmot and Cecil were recording in Greece in June 1941, for example, where Wilmot ‘sailed in the last ship to leave Piraeus’ during the country’s evacuation, the *ABC Weekly* noted the personal significance of the interviews to families in Australia.[587] ‘Listeners will probably hear some of these messages fairly soon’, it reported, ‘but unhappily a number of the Diggers who sat on a green bank that day and told their mothers or wives or children that they’d be home for Christmas won’t ever be coming home’.[588] Wilmot and Cecil had, therefore, performed a

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[581] T. W. Bearup letter to Wilmot, 6 Jun 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 48, NLA.
[582] *Ibid*.
[583] T. W. Bearup letter to Wilmot, 20 Aug 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 48, NLA.
[584] See <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/about/our-mission/sounds-australia>. Accessed 25 May 2022.
[585] *Argus*, 13 Oct 1941, 4.
[586] *Smith’s Weekly*, 18 Oct 1941, 4.
[587] *ABC Weekly*, 28 Jun 1941, 13.
[588] *Ibid*.

valuable deed in recording these men's voices, preserving an oral memory of their lives and contributions to the war effort. This, it was increasingly recognised in the Second World War, was one of radio's greatest values in war reporting. As Peter Stursberg, who worked as a war correspondent in radio for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at the same time as Wilmot and Cecil, later remarked, the field recordings made by the CBC provided 'a vivid oral and sound history of the Canadian fighting men in the Second World War'.[589]

Figure 15: Chester Wilmot recording troops singing in the Middle East, 1941 (NAA)

Such was the contribution of the Field Unit in terms of the range and depth of their output that the *ABC Weekly* claimed that their work had 'achieved world-wide fame'.[590] Certainly the Unit had gained a level of fame both at home and in the field. In relaying programmes broadcast at home to the troops on and around the front lines, the Unit assisted in, as one soldier put it, 'helping us to feel not quite so far from home'.[591] The ABC recording truck became a familiar site to troops in the Middle East and was readily associated with a somewhat tangible link to Australia. Indeed, after the war's conclusion, the truck was still used by the ABC in Australia. When it was used to broadcast from the Sydney Royal Agricultural Show in 1947, for example, the ex-servicemen in attendance took great interest in its presence. 'For these men', it was reported, 'the truck, now somewhat battered after

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[589] Peter Stursberg, *The Sound of War: Memoirs of a CBC Correspondent* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 290.
[590] *ABC Weekly*, 8 Nov 1941, 9.
[591] *ABC Weekly*, 4 Jan 1941, 48.

seven years' service, has memories. It was in it that they recorded greetings and messages, broadcast for friends and relatives during some of the darkest days of the war'.[592]

This was an achievement Wilmot often seemed to overlook during the war, preferring instead to focus on his relentless quest for news and knowledge of the battlefield. While this was a significant aspect of their work, it was, as Bearup routinely made clear in his letters to the Unit, the recordings of the troops' voices and special feature programmes like the Tobruk cave concert that were most highly prized. This was because these kinds of recordings served as a metaphorical bridge between the Australian troops and the Australian people. There was a reason why Cecil's *Voices from Overseas* feature was so tremendously popular and regularly written about in local Australian newspapers. 'To hear from the battle zone the voice of a fighting son or a nursing daughter', the Rockhampton *Morning Bulletin* reported in October 1941, 'is a momentous event that brings joy out of grim anxiety, and inspires a higher faith in our cause in thousands of homes throughout Australia'.[593] When the voices of local sons and daughters on active duty were heard on the radio it was a great source of pride and comfort to those communities, with residents being informed of the relevant broadcasts ahead of time.[594] In this way, broadcasts like *Voices from Overseas* likely helped to provide for Australia something similar to what historian Michelle Hilmes has argued was happening in America between the early 1920s and late 1940s. Radio at that time, she notes, drawing on Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, was helping to foster an 'imagined community' in America: 'Physically, culturally, in a common language and through national semi-public institutions, radio spoke to, and about, a nation'.[595] By capturing a wide range of voices from across Australia amidst the context of the battlefield, Wilmot and Cecil were assisting Australians in their imagination of their countrymen's exploits overseas, creating an audio picture of events they were involved in, their successes and hardships, and their messages to those back home. In contributing towards this 'imagined community', their work simultaneously provided useful propaganda material for the ABC and the Government.

Wilmot's primary interest remained, however, covering events that would be of historical significance, resulting in his becoming an almost obsessive front line reporter and collector of information. As the British war correspondent David Woodward recalled, Wilmot's 'colleagues considered that a briefing from [him] about what was going on was just as good as a briefing from one of the more intelligent high-up army officers. He sometimes seemed to them a bit different from the rest of them. He was already a historian, working as a correspondent'.[596] This resulted in Wilmot often coming across as dogmatic and dispassionate in his approach, with Richard Dimbleby later claiming that Wilmot's only interest was in battlefield tactics: 'blood didn't come into it at all'.[597] Because of Wilmot's undoubted commitment, however, to documenting the war's proceedings in the Middle East,

[592] *ABC Weekly*, 5 Apr 1947, 2.
[593] *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 22 Oct 1941, 4.
[594] See, for example, *Glen Innes Examiner*, 16 Sep 1941, 4; *Daily Mercury* (Mackay), 17 Jan 1942, 4.
[595] Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis, Min: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 22-23.
[596] Note from David Woodward to Alan Wood, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 1, NLA.
[597] Richard Dimbleby interviewed by Alan Wood, Oct 1956, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 53, folder 1, NLA.

along with Cecil's relentless recording sessions behind the lines, the ABC was supplied with an extensive range of material that expertly chronicled the experiences of Australian personnel, providing at the same time useful propaganda material. As with the Department of Information's Film Unit, internal disputes did not seriously hamper the ABC Field Unit's ability to function effectively in the field.

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Cooperation and Rivalry: Osmar White with Johnston, Parer and Wilmot in New Guinea, 1942

With the bulk of the Australian forces having been moved from the Middle East to the Pacific in early 1942, so too was the country's focus of attention shifted to this new theatre of war. The fighting, for so long distant from Australia's shores and relayed through the press, radio and newsreels, was now on its doorstep. Regardless of whether it had any basis in fact, it was, as historian Peter Stanley has written, 'entirely understandable that an uninformed public would suppose that the Japanese, having conquered South-East Asia so swiftly, would keep going' all the way to Australia.[598] As George Johnston wrote in *My Brother Jack*, 'To Australians in those first two months of 1942 this was no longer the mythic far adventure. The seemingly invincible Japanese were swarming through the Pacific, bombs were actually falling on Australian soil, and war was at the very threshold'.[599] With the fall of Singapore ensured by mid-February, there was a clamour for news of operations in the Pacific, with New Guinea becoming the key area of concern.

Having received their accreditation in January, Osmar White and George Johnston became two of the first Australian war correspondents active in New Guinea, arriving together in Port Moresby on 13 February 1942, with Damien Parer and Chester Wilmot arriving in June and July respectively. There followed an intense period of cooperation between White, Parer and, eventually, Wilmot in which the three worked closely together as they joined Australian forces on the Kokoda Track in August-September (White and Parer having already worked together outside Lae and Salamaua). The cooperation between White, Parer and Wilmot has recently been described by journalism scholar Josie Vine as a significant episode of 'journalism's micro-cultural history' in Australia during the Second World War.[600] 'Their eye-witness documentation of battle (in itself Larrikin-like in its risk-taking)', she writes, 'are held up as exemplars of best professional practice'.[601] The intensity of their cooperation was such that it became the most celebrated of Australian journalists' work in New Guinea and has had a lasting impact on the Australian imagination of the New Guinea campaign. While the three men operated in a collaborative manner during this time, there was a distinct sense that competition for news—the desire to get and break the story—was profound. Petty rivalries and jealousies among war correspondents grew increasingly pronounced, with White and Johnston maintaining a less than friendly relationship with each other. As such, their work in the field in 1942 is an interesting case study of press cooperation and rivalry amidst an unfamiliar battlefield so close to home. As he was the only one to work closely with the three other men, White's experiences in New Guinea in 1942 are particularly illuminative.

[598] Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942* (Melbourne: Viking, 2008), 15.
[599] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 309.
[600] Josie Vine, *Larrikins, Rebels and Journalistic Freedom in Australia* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 79.
[601] *Ibid.*, 79.

Upon their arrival in Port Moresby, White and Johnston were confronted with the harsh reality of conditions there. Writing to his wife, Mollie, two days later, White noted that 'Press work under such conditions is about the toughest proposition imaginable. I don't think any correspondents in the world at the moment are working under sheer down to the bone nastier conditions when it comes to getting stuff, writing it, and sending it away'.[602] Aside from the stiflingly hot temperatures, Port Moresby was a site of chaotic activity: it had recently been bombed, the local population were being evacuated, and Australian troops had engaged in a looting spree.[603] It was also, Johnston recalled, a virtual black hole of news, with little coming out of New Guinea and little coming in. 'News of home is more important than anything else', he wrote in his notebook (published as *New Guinea Diary* in mid-1943), 'The few men who own radio sets are besieged each night by men who sit in dozens outside in the darkness silently listening to the news … Every new arrival is inundated with requests for mainland newspapers, because the only newspapers you see up here are two months old'.[604] The job of these first print journalists to arrive in New Guinea, therefore, was complicated by the news situation there. White soon found, for example, that he had little sense of what was actually being published in Australia about the region. 'Is Moresby top-line news now, or not? When was it?', he wrote in March, 'A journalist's review of the journalistic situation would be very helpful'.[605]

White asked this question in part because, after the Japanese arrival in Lae and Salamaua in early March, 'there was a long hiatus before anything really happened'.[606] This despite the fact that the anxious Australian public were keen for news of the war. As Paul Hasluck wrote in a volume of the Official History, after the fall of Singapore and the Japanese landing in New Guinea, 'Australia saw the enemy at her threshold … there was at the time a conviction, both among members of the Government and among the people, that the invaders would soon come'.[607] The work of correspondents like White would, therefore, be a crucial element in Australians' understanding of the nature of the Japanese threat and the work being done in New Guinea to prevent a potential invasion of Australia.

The correspondents were billeted in an old plantation house near administrative headquarters, where White found that he wanted little to do with his colleagues. 'I certainly shan't be travelling in a press party', he wrote to his wife:

> I haven't much in common, so to speak, with the rest of the gang in the correspondents' hut. Barry Young, *Truth* and *Mirror* man, is the best of the bunch. Another six months and I'll cut Folkard's throat, quickly followed by a lethal assault on the ABC man, Lennard, who is a 24 carat lout with the only saving grace his toughness. Johnston is querulous and won't last. Maybe I'm wrong, though. He has

[602] White letter to Mollie White, 15 Feb 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[603] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 41.
[604] George Johnston, *New Guinea Diary* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1943), 20.
[605] White letter to Mollie White, 14 Mar 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[606] Osmar White interview with Peter Jepperson, 14 Oct 1990, S00981, AWM.
[607] Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People: 1942-1945* (Canberra: AWM, 1970), 72. See also 125-130.

> intelligence; this may make up for his lack of physical guts … uncongenial company.[608]

White's impression of his peers, particularly Johnston, likely stemmed from his perception that he was more willing to risk his life in search of the facts than others. In this way, he shared a trait with Wilmot. The determination to report the facts of a story, as noted in chapter one, marked White's journalistic career, and it came to define the way that he worked in the field in New Guinea. Writing again to his wife in early April, he stated that 'I'm glad … that you reckon my messages have a certain distinguishing realism. I might as well be—and am—very serious about this job, and I want to be as balanced in mood as I am accurate in fact'.[609]

Johnston, meanwhile, seems to have had somewhat different concerns to White. As noted in chapter two, Johnston had long held ambitions to use his journalism career as a springboard to a 'higher' writing life. His record of events in 1942, *New Guinea Diary*, is the closest thing we have to Johnston's own commentary of his experiences in the region, but in reality it is the end product of his determination to, in the words of his biographer, 'get a book out of New Guinea' which would be 'aimed at the popular market, confining itself almost entirely to action and feats of heroism'.[610] Few of the events recounted in the book were actually witnessed by Johnston, meaning that, as with his Meredith novels, the historian must attempt to 'read between the lines' to get to the reality of Johnston's experiences in New Guinea. White doubtless recognised Johnston's ambition. *New Guinea Diary* was published just months after his second (and final) return from New Guinea to Melbourne in December 1942. 'He was not a good sharer of information', White recalled after the war, 'If George went off to see the General [whereas] most of the other blokes would say what the hell he was saying, George wouldn't tell you: he was not prepared to. He was after the beat, which made him a damn good newspaperman'.[611]

There was not an insignificant amount of hypocrisy displayed by White in his criticisms of Johnston's determination to scoop his colleagues. Just prior to the arrival of various American and British war correspondents in New Guinea in late April, most notably the American correspondent Hubert Knickerbocker, White set about 'industriously cleaning up every uncovered angle [of the war in New Guinea] in specials etc so that when they come the cupboard will be bare'.[612] Following Knickerbocker's arrival, White took a strong dislike to the American, complaining that he was a:

> fraud. A slick personality man without the slightest accuracy or the slightest honesty. He has chosen me for a professional enemy … and I return the compliment. I Pearl Harbored him with the G.O.C. the other night on a little question of a certain story in

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[608] White letter to Mollie White, 4 Mar 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[609] White letter to Mollie White, 7 Apr 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[610] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 45.
[611] Garry Kinnane interview with Osmar White, cited in Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 43.
[612] White letter to Mollie White, 19 Apr 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.

the offing, and all I'm praying now is to be present when he finds out he has been done in the eye.[613]

Clearly White himself was not above the petty 'hoarding' of news and believed himself to be in competition with other correspondents. As historian Kevin Williams has written, 'Competition and cynicism are close companions in the world of war correspondence'—White certainly displayed both characteristics in New Guinea.[614] This stemmed, in part, from his self-recognised egotistical nature: 'I know you know I'm an egoist', he wrote to his wife, 'I suppose it's because I'm finding war—even the blind man's bluff war hitherto waged here—the most stimulating and challenging thing to strength of individuality that one can possibly imagine'.[615] Perhaps White's dim view of Johnston stemmed from this belief that war presented the ultimate challenge to one's character. This challenge, he believed, had to be met and overcome. 'Cowards', he wrote, 'must have their cowardice laid bare and their voices … made small for all time'.[616] Johnston, who preferred to base himself at the Headquarters in Port Moresby rather than venturing to sites of conflict to witness events first-hand, would have greatly irritated White for, in his opinion, failing to meet the challenge of war. A good correspondent, White later noted, had an 'ability to see things clearly when the pressure's on. It's very easy to see things that aren't there if you're really running away very fast'.[617]

By remaining at the base throughout most of his time in New Guinea, Johnston was emblematic of the kind of war correspondent White resented. With the South West Pacific Area command established under General Douglas MacArthur in April 1942, White later recalled that 'Johnston … rewrote MacArthur communiques. I didn't respect him as a war correspondent … He never tried to beat the propaganda gate'.[618] Though I shall discuss the issue of censorship in the next chapter, White's frustrations with Johnston stemmed to a large degree from his impression that Johnston was hiding well behind the actual fighting, preferring to glean his stories from intelligence officers and official communiques. On this matter, Johnston wrote in *My Brother Jack* that:

> I never walked the Kokoda Trail … I saw something of the fighting at Buna and Gona, but my visits there were short. In a sense these were no more than the necessary skirmishes made to pick up the vibrant colour, the human textures, that would be woven into the more detailed and more comprehensive pictures of the struggle which could only be done competently—or so I was able to convince myself—from some base headquarters far behind the fighting.[619]

Johnston did not feel the need or inclination to visit battlefield sites, preferring instead to work from base and craft his story there. Johnston's and White's reporting styles were

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[613] White letter to Mollie White, 25 Apr 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[614] Williams, *A New History of War Reporting*, 98.
[615] White letter to Mollie White, 25 Apr 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[616] *Ibid*.
[617] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.
[618] *Ibid*.
[619] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 314.

evidently worlds apart, with White unable to comprehend why Johnston had no desire to see the fighting for himself, putting this down to cowardice and a lack of genuine journalistic engagement. White was also frustrated by Johnston's determination to write himself into the story, despite not being near the action. This practice became known among war correspondents as 'magic carpeting'.[620] When Johnston wrote in a despatch in July, for instance, that 'As a war correspondent I saw much of what went on before and behind the scenes … I saw youngsters exhibiting real heroism on the ground and in the air', White doubtless viewed this as disingenuous, falsely placing Johnston at the heart of the action.[621] In this way, Johnston was somewhat similar to his fellow journalist-novelist Ernest Hemingway in injecting himself into his stories. On Hemingway's D-Day account (which he witnessed from a landing ship), for instance, the literature scholar Verna Kale has written that it is 'at once a fine piece of experiential reporting and an unabashedly self-centred approach to one of the most important events in American history. No one played so great a role in the piece as Hemingway … the piece is as evocative as it is self-serving'.[622] Both Hemingway and Johnston sought to bolster their reputations through these kinds of despatches, with Johnston likely keeping in mind his desire to write novels after the war. By locating himself, like Hemingway, amidst the heart of the action as a kind of *participant* in events, Johnston attempted to lend his literary voice a greater sense of authenticity and intrigue, despite having seen little action.[623]

There was a great deal of truth in White's characterisation of Johnston's work in New Guinea, though White doubtless went too far when he accused him of knowing 'bugger all'.[624] 'I hate the cowards and the ignoramuses, the place-seekers and the place-holders … But most of all I hate the Boneheads', he wrote with Johnston in mind.[625] It was largely this determination to meet the challenge of war by witnessing and experiencing it for himself, alongside the ongoing press competition, which motivated White's trip up the Bulldog Track to the areas around Lae and Salamaua with Parer in July. This trip would be the first of its kind among the press pack in New Guinea, its potential for unique stories attracting White. As the journalism scholar Jeremy Tunstall has written, within the occupation 'there is wide recognition … that to produce an important exclusive requires not merely luck and successful access to sources, but also judgement and courage'.[626] This trip with Parer, White believed, would allow him not only to demonstrate his courage, but in so doing give him an edge over his journalist competitors in Port Moresby.

Parer had arrived in New Guinea in June and, though still employed by the Department of Information, was now very much operating as a lone cameraman. Given the 'realisation that

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[620] Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters*, 140.
[621] *Australasian*, 18 Jul 1942, 8.
[622] Verna Kale, *Ernest Hemingway* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 133.
[623] The literature scholar Jackson Benson has written that, in his war reporting, 'Hemingway almost invariably wrote about himself, either directly or indirectly'. Jackson Benson, *Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 208.
[624] White letter to Mollie White, 10 Aug 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[625] *Ibid*.
[626] Jeremy Tunstall, *Journalists at Work: Special Correspondents: Their News Organizations, News Sources, and Competitor-Colleagues* (London: Constable, 1971), 215.

Australia was seemingly in direct threat of attack', as historian Kay Saunders has written, the Department of Information had 'found a new sense of urgency and purpose' in its propaganda production.[627] As New Guinea had been devoid of much news coverage, Parer's pictures from the region would be invaluable for the Department's propaganda efforts.

White devised the trip partly for the opportunity to see for himself the terrain over which Australian troops would soon be fighting. New Guinea's terrain had, as discussed in chapter one, always been of great interest to him and it was his fundamental belief that 'we weren't going to hold the Japanese back, the country was'.[628] This was the central hypothesis of his subsequent book, *Green Armour*. The harsh conditions of the rugged New Guinea rainforest, he believed, served as a kind of natural barrier to any potential invasion of Australia.[629] Indeed, White's most well received despatch in the first half of 1942 was an atmospheric piece detailing the landscape over which the conflict was to take place. Written in an artistic and literary manner reflective of his time spent in the company of the Darks and their social circle in the Blue Mountains, White noted that 'In all the accounts of all the battles I have ever read, I have always suffered a feeling of frustration because the historians failed to describe to my satisfaction the stage setting of the drama'.[630] 'This drenched landscape which I can now see through a glassless window is soon to become a battlefield', he continued, 'If the battle begins by day, the sky will be a hot, hurtful blue, broken by castled cumulus clouds. Or if it begins at night, the sky will be black with rain, or a soft blue in which the stars burn miraculously big and bright'.[631] Believing the piece to be both genuinely informative and artistically written, White was thrilled with the reception he received for it. 'Darnton of the NY Times … was almost embarrassingly congratulatory', he wrote, '[he] said it was the finest atmospheric piece he had yet seen written on the war'.[632]

During the trip White and Parer, with the assistance of native helpers, would travel to meet commandos of the 2/5th Independent Company, known as 'Kanga Force', as they carried out guerrilla operations. White had managed to secure permission from the Army to make the trip, however it was insisted that Parer, as a government employee, join him on the excursion. White's first impression of Parer was a positive one, writing that he was 'a thoroughly tough little tack with two years experience in the Western Desert, Tobruk, Greece, and Syria … He's a dark, wiry, pleasant youth with terrific energy behind his rather lazy movements. Live brown eyes and muscles as tough as whipcord'.[633] In contrast to Johnston, Parer had, in White's opinion, proven himself amidst the challenge of war. White's characterisation of Parer in *Green Armour* thus emphasises the fact that:

> Parer had at that time seen more real action than probably any other war correspondent. He was—first, last and all the time—a front-line cameraman. Young,

[627] Saunders, "'An Instrument of Strategy': Propaganda, Public Policy and the Media in Australia During the Second World War", 82-83.
[628] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.
[629] *Ibid*.
[630] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 23 Apr 1942, 4.
[631] *Ibid*.
[632] White letter to Mollie White, 5 May 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[633] White letter to Mollie White, 28 Jun 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.

tough, keen and unshakably courageous, he had photographed the worst of the fighting in Greece, Crete, two desert campaigns and Syria. The more I saw of the man, the more I liked and admired him.[634]

For such a challenging and significant trip, therefore, White believed that he could have had no colleague better suited than Parer. He was under no illusions about the scale of the undertaking. 'Before 1942', he wrote nearly two years later, 'very few white men had crossed the island west of Port Moresby by any route whatsoever. The vast mountainous spine of New Guinea was terra incognita'.[635] Just as exciting for White was the prospect of seeing things other correspondents had not yet witnessed, both along the track and once the duo reached Kanga Force. Writing to his wife two days after they departed, he stated that 'I've been busy noting all sorts of stuff that seems almost too good to be true … it'll be well worth while the journey even if I haven't the luck to strike hot news at the other end'.[636] Parer's presence was a useful addition, with White adding that 'you'll be able to see brief glimpses of the whole business on the newsreels when the item is released. It will probably make a ten or fifteen minute feature'.[637] The collaborative nature of the trip, with White reporting on it in the press (within reason) and Parer producing material for newsreels, ensured that there would be dynamic coverage of this as yet unseen side of the war in the Pacific. Parer's footage of the schooner *Royal Endeavour*, which carried them from Port Moresby to the Lakekamu River, from where they would travel to the Bulldog Track, is unique and documents a side of the conflict that was hitherto unreported. This footage was eventually made into the Movietone newsreel *The Most Amazing Supply Route of the War*, depicting the process by which supplies were hauled along the harsh terrain to the troops of Kanga Force.[638] White himself is pictured numerous times in the newsreel.

For his part, White too got the material 'a man might dream of for a lifetime' from the trip: 'If it goes on like this I'll never have to search for ideas again! … I'm enjoying myself magnificently'.[639] No doubt White was thrilled with the access to information that the expedition afforded him, knowing that it would provide a highly fertile and original basis for numerous reports which other correspondents would not be able to scoop from him. His feature article recounting the trip, entitled 'Through New Guinea's Jungles to War's Strangest Front Line', serves as a kind of companion piece to Parer's newsreel of the events described by White.[640] With the worst of the fighting in New Guinea yet to break out, White had secured for himself a story of remarkable adventure and action, providing an insight into the early conflict around what he called the 'Tobruk of the Pacific'.[641] He had also, much like Johnston, written himself into the story, with the *Daily Telegraph* reporting on his article that 'Bored by an endless succession of Jap bombings at Moresby, Osmar White … decided he

[634] White, *Green Armour*, 91.
[635] *News* (Adelaide), 1 Apr 1944, 2.
[636] White letter to Mollie White, 3 Jul 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[637] *Ibid*.
[638] Damien Parer, 'War Supply Route', 2-15 Jul 1942, film, F01213, AWM; see also McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 183.
[639] White letter to Mollie White, 5 Jul 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[640] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 5 Aug 1942, 4.
[641] *Ibid*.

wanted action'.[642] In the same vein as his pre-war short stories of daring adventure and 'mystery thrillers', as discussed in chapter one, White's piece emphasised the heroic and pioneering aspect of his journey, writing that:

> Nothing authoritative had ever been written or said about that front-line. Nobody, of scores of Army officers to whom I spoke, admitted knowing precisely how to get there, or what was going on there … It was the most remote, mysterious, secret front line in a whole world at war. I could find nobody who had ever been there, or more than hear tell of anybody who was going. I asked permission in the highest quarters to go find it … The most explicit directions I could obtain from the most informed circles were a mere jumble of meaningless names. A jerk of the thumb towards those wild, mysterious, powder-blue mountains.[643]

It was an artistically and suspensefully written piece which reads as though it could have been composed by White in Katoomba in the late 1920s. He wrote to his wife that it was 'a remarkable story. One of these days, what fiction it will make! And what sober truth, for that matter'.[644] This story, however, had real, factual substance and White recognised that he was sitting on something that many of his correspondent peers would have wanted for themselves. Writing after his return to Port Moresby in early August, for instance, he noted that the result of his trip was 'the arrival of no fewer than 16 correspondents … I answered all [their] questions in the vaguest of vague terms and then contradicted myself. Reptillian—but I'm damned if I see why I should walk my feet off to the ankles for the benefit of a bunch of crows! All the really good stuff is tucked up my sleeve'.[645] The success of the articles which resulted from his trip, he complained, 'has created the embarrassing spectre of fierce competition … By God, this is a cut-throat game!'.[646]

Clearly White was highly suspicious of many of his fellow correspondents and actively sought to safeguard his own journalistic ambitions by being highly protective of his stories and information. When he found, however, correspondents like Parer with whom he felt an affinity and respect for, he was eager to collaborate. When Chester Wilmot arrived in Port Moresby as the ABC's representative in July, White was immediately impressed by his experience and battlefield knowledge. Upon first meeting him, White wrote that 'Wilmot [is] an opinionated broadcaster-bloke, of the fat and hearty type, but a good sort', a few days later noting that 'Wilmot is another Middle East veteran who did very good work at Tobruk'.[647] Wilmot's knowledge could, White believed, prove a valuable asset to his reporting as he planned a further trip with Parer along the Kokoda Track. Wilmot was, he noted long after the war, 'more a strategic analyst … a war historian rather than a … current comment

[642] *Ibid.*
[643] *Ibid.*
[644] White letter to Mollie White, 19 Jul 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[645] White letter to Mollie White, 10 Aug 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[646] White letter to Mollie White, 16 Aug 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[647] White letter to Mollie White, 10 and 16 Aug 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.

man'.[648] Wilmot, therefore, did not seem to present much of a threat to White's journalistic instincts to get and break the story.

For his part, Wilmot would be without his recording equipment on the Track, instead taking on the role of a forward observer for the ABC and reporting back on events later. His recordings would be made when he returned to Port Moresby. 'There won't be any chance of getting [the recording equipment] near the front, as there is no road through', he wrote to Bearup in early August, 'If fighting develops in the Kokoda area however I think I shall trek across the mountains to see the men who have been doing the fighting. It may mean being away for several weeks, but I feel that we might get some excellent material. You may have seen stories by the Telegraph correspondent, White, who walked over to Wau'.[649]

Figure 16: Osmar White (left) with Chester Wilmot, New Guinea, 19 October 1942 (Damien Parer, AWM)

The trip up the Kokoda Track, in which the three men would join elements of the 21st Brigade as they travelled over the Owen Stanleys to engage the Japanese around Isurava (who had been fighting Australian Militia troops), was devised by the correspondents themselves so that there would be some press representation at the first major engagements of Australian troops in New Guinea. The historian Neil McDonald has claimed that the correspondents were sent by Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell himself to cover the events,

[648] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.
[649] Wilmot letter to T. W. Bearup, 6 Aug 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.

however I have found no evidence to support this—letters sent by White and Wilmot at the time strongly suggest that the trip had been on their own initiative.[650] For White, the trip was largely motivated by the success of the pieces which stemmed from his first expedition with Parer, providing him as they did with unique stories which were both factually insightful and original. Writing shortly before the three men set off, White wrote excitedly of the reception to his war coverage, noting that 'Neil Moody has written three times in ten days with lurid accounts of how Sydney was lapping up the specials, particularly the diary article. Quotes Professor Macallum as praising it on the air, of McNulty calling me the war's first great (!) correspondent … and of people falling on his neck and sobbing about it being the most moving account of war they had ever read. McNulty wrote me fan mail … Keith Palmer wrote saying the article had created a first rate sensation'.[651] The response to his articles clearly excited White and he was determined to improve further on this success by continuing to outdo his fellow print journalists. Referring to them in the same letter, White wrote that:

> I'm heartily sick of this housefull of imitation reptiles … I'm bitter about the crowd for their utter hackishness. Cut-throating lot of apes, driven by a niggardly ambition for personal success … or rather an ambition to be thought successful. Nine tenths of them, particularly the Yanks, are yellow bluffers, who'd tell the Japs just how to beat us if it meant a day's notoriety. Seriously, there are times when I do wonder how much I'm splashed with the same tarbrush.[652]

Recognising that he too sought success and recognition for his work in the field, White saw in Parer and Wilmot two correspondents who were proven men of action and daring, as well as correspondents who did not represent a threat to his own journalistic ambitions. Indeed, in New Guinea Wilmot would not even be able to make the kind of actuality recordings that he and Cecil had made in the Middle East. Writing to Bearup, he stated that:

> we shall not be able to use recording gear in this campaign to anything like the extent we have used it in the past. At present we are separated from the enemy by sea or mountains. In this island warfare it will seldom be possible for us to get near enough to the front to make actuality recordings or even interviews with troops … It will seldom be possible for our observer to record his despatches. He may be able to get back to a base every now and again but for the most part he will have to rely on sending back telegraphed messages.[653]

As such, there was a sense that there was no competition for news or exclusive features between the three men and that, owing to their combined experience and reputations in the field, the collaborative nature of the trip would be mutually beneficial. The material produced by White, Wilmot and Parer on the Kokoda Track in August and September 1942 combined to greatly inform the popular impression of the fighting in New Guinea. Parer's images provided the visual 'evidence' for the words of White and Wilmot, with *Kokoda Front Line*, released in September 1942, becoming a sensation. Opening to huge queues, admitted to the theatre free of charge, the film received high praise in Australia, with one newspaper

[650] Neil McDonald, "Reporting the Papuan Campaign", *Quadrant* 46, no. 11 (2002): 68-69.
[651] White letter to Mollie White, 16 Aug 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[652] *Ibid*.
[653] Wilmot letter to T. W. Bearup, 14 Aug 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.

reporting that 'Parer tells a thrilling story of front line fighting … and he shows some remarkable jungle warfare pictures. Parer's camera has captured sidelights of the highest dramatic value'.[654] Indeed, as historian Hank Nelson has written, 'later writers and film-makers have been almost solely dependent on the images captured by Damien Parer' when attempting to picture the action in New Guinea.[655]

Though I shall discuss the film in greater depth in chapter eight, it is important to recognise here that Parer's images were the perfect foil for White's press reports and other writings about the fighting around Kokoda, as well as Wilmot's radio reports. The historian Kevin Williams has argued that, in historical analysis, photojournalism (and, I would add, broadcast journalism), has often been 'considered apart' from print journalism, 'neglecting the ways in which visual media forms have impacted on print correspondents'.[656] In the case of White, Parer and Wilmot, the multimedia nature of their cooperation resulted in dynamic coverage of the campaign in New Guinea in 1942, their different journalistic mediums speaking to each other in their conveyance of a particular heroic and informative impression of the action. When White's 'stirring eye-witness story' about the trip and the fighting on the Kokoda Track was published, for instance, he conveyed an impression of the fighting identical to the one presented by Parer in *Kokoda Front Line*, celebrating the heroic perseverance of the Australian troops.[657] 'Gradually the picture of what is happening sorts itself out', White wrote, 'All through these hills are two weaving crescents of men, seeking one another to kill … Mortars still going behind. Rain is falling gently, steadily. The rotten forest gleams with its glowing fungus … Surely no war was ever fought under worse conditions … There can be no more fortitude than I saw on that track'.[658] Parer's pictures of the men trudging through the Kokoda mud, displaying a remarkable spirit of endurance, encapsulates the themes displayed in White's journalism.

By working collaboratively and in such proximity with each other, the vision conveyed by the three men of events on the Kokoda Track was essentially identical. This was partly because they had shared an intense experience in which they had lived under the same conditions as the troops. 'Much of the country is absolutely charming', White later recalled, 'but it didn't feel like it with 3,000 men churning up the trail under your feet and the mud … what I saw was the difficulty of moving large bodies of troops in that particular environment and that coloured my work for a long while'.[659] Likely also, in discussion with each other they had come to form similar views about the nature of the fighting and those in command, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Having undertaken two extraordinary expeditions in New Guinea in 1942, White must have felt like one of the heroes of his own adventure stories. Though they were motivated by a

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[654] *Truth* (Sydney), 20 Sep 1942, 27.
[655] Hank Nelson, "Kokoda: Pushing the Popular Image", *Journal of Pacific History* 45, no. 1 (2010): 91.
[656] Williams, *A New History of War Reporting*, 4.
[657] *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 13 Sep 1942, 3.
[658] *Ibid*.
[659] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.

genuine desire to know the 'full story' and see for himself what Australian troops were experiencing on the island, there was also at play a self-recognised journalistic impulse to 'beat' the competition. By putting himself in harm's way, White knew that he would gain access to information and stories that few other correspondents were privy to, resulting in his articles being the most celebrated of any Australian print journalist in New Guinea. While Parer's images provided the visual substance to the events of great significance taking place in New Guinea, White's reports added further descriptive detail and enthralling narratives to the previously limited supply of news. He also wrote *himself*, as well as his friends Parer and Wilmot, into the story, becoming important witnesses of newsworthy events. While he criticised those like Johnston for remaining well behind the fighting, White was busy defending his own journalistic interests by seeking out and withholding information from many of his peers, whom he described as 'a bunch of crows'. In seeking to get ahead of the 'pack', White worked collaboratively with those whom he respected: Damien Parer and Chester Wilmot. The result was some of the finest despatches about the Australian experience of war in New Guinea, artistically and descriptively written, which placed the experiences of the troops amidst tough conditions at the heart of the story. Parer, of course, attempted to do something similar via the film medium, while Wilmot's broadcasts had always sought to inform the listener about ongoing events and their significance in the grand scheme of the war.

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This chapter has focussed on the work of these war correspondents during their periods of employment by Australian organisations and while they covered primarily Australian forces in the field. As such, it has taken a detailed look at the years 1940 to 1942. Some, like Chester Wilmot and Osmar White, would not be in Australian employment beyond these years. The later work of those like Damien Parer and George Silk will be considered in subsequent chapters.

What this analysis has revealed is that, with the exception of Kenneth Slessor, and despite the fierce rivalry that sometimes existed between them, there was a remarkable degree of cooperation and interaction between war correspondents in the field. Sometimes this interaction was fraught with personal difficulties and petty jealousies, as was the case with the Department of Information's Film Unit and the ABC's Field Unit. Usually, however, these difficulties were rendered largely insignificant by the sheer weight and reception of the work produced for Australian and international consumption. Indeed, we might refer to the breadth of their coverage, to borrow Slessor's phrase, as 'a vast national work', providing as it did multiple ways in which Australians might imagine their countrymen's exploits in the field. Like never before, the sight and sound of war was brought before an Australian audience in ways which were often highly evocative, artistic and unique. In this multimedia era of war reportage, the conception of Slessor as a kind of 'second coming' of Bean was proven to be antiquated and, to a significant extent, irrelevant. Amidst the rush for news or

unique features, such as those produced by White in New Guinea, someone like Slessor was bound to be left behind.

These interactions in the field also tell us something about the correspondents themselves—their approach to their work, their perception of others, and what they sought to achieve. There was, in all cases, something of the man and the journalist before the conflict present in the correspondent now reporting on the war. Parer and Silk the obsessive film and photography students; Wilmot the quarrelsome debater with a keen interest in history; White the literary writer with an eye for the facts of a story; Slessor the poetic writer with an uneasy relationship with his journalistic trade; and Johnston the ambitious writer of novels, biding his time in the profession. There was also no shortage of ego among the group, with personal relationships and pleasantries discarded in favour of their own work and the fulfilment of their journalistic ambitions. Certainly, they believed that the war would be the making of them as a journalist and, in some cases, as an artist. The theatre of war would, they hoped, be the pinnacle of their professional career, providing them a great opportunity to enhance their reputations. The result was an approach to war coverage which, while touched and informed by some of their peers, was intensely personal and shaped by their own desire to produce work of significance which would be remembered long after the war.

Chapter Seven

'Control' and 'Facilitation': Responses to Official Authority

In the entry for the day of his arrival on 13 February 1942, George Johnston wrote in *New Guinea Diary* that:

> in the pocket of my uniform was the army licence for "Accredited War Correspondents accompanying a force in the field in Australia or its territories" … I thought back a few days to dingy Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, where I have waded, pen in hand, through the morass of red tape to sign the endless stream of documents that provided the army with such valuable data as the fact that my eyes were green, my height was five feet eleven and a half inches, my age was 29, my parents were British, that I had a wife and a four-months'-old baby and a slight scar above my left knee. I had signed (in quadruplicate) an enormous document setting out my undertaking to "comply, comply, comply, agree, refrain, refrain, comply, comply and waive…".[660]

This sentiment—that official authority over their work, particularly in terms of censorship, was relentless—was echoed at one time or another by all the war correspondents considered here. Certainly, the work and movements of Australian war correspondents in the Second World War were, as one would expect, tightly monitored by a number of different bodies. The restrictions placed on them increased and became more formal as the war progressed, particularly after Australian forces became engaged in the Pacific from early 1942. With the establishment of the Army Directorate of Public Relations (ADPR) in January 1942, press regulations were essentially dictated by them: 'The Army Directorate of Public Relations', the draft censorship instructions of April 1942 stated, 'will assume responsibility for those functions previously carried out in war time by that portion of M.I. Ic [Military Intelligence, Intelligence Corps] Sub-Section which dealt with publicity, propaganda and Liaison between Army and Publicity censorship'.[661] This meant that 'field officers' of the Directorate would 'control and facilitate the operations' of war correspondents, while the Directorate as a whole would be responsible for 'advising correspondents of security needs and facilitating correspondents' material through censorship'.[662]

Australian war correspondents often felt that they were compelled to navigate a path through this complex system of 'facilitation' and 'control' in which it was not always clear when the former ended and the latter began. Their response to this varied, however in numerous instances action was taken by one or more correspondents on behalf of the wider group. The perception of an overreach of official authority (by which I primarily mean censorship and control over movements) was, it was stressed time and again by the correspondents, viewed as an injustice against all those in the profession. This chapter will consider some of these responses to official authority and the way in which issues relating to it were experienced and

[660] George Johnston, *New Guinea Diary*, 5-6.
[661] Department of Army, 'Draft censorship instructions', Apr 1942, MP508/1, 52/702/139, NAA (Melbourne).
[662] *Ibid*.

dealt with by those concerned. It begins with an analysis of the changing regulations which correspondents were subjected to from the Middle East to New Guinea, paying particular attention to their responses to these, before moving on to consider two particularly relevant case studies: the disaccreditation of Chester Wilmot in November 1942, and the resignations of George Silk and Damien Parer from the Department of Information in 1943. As such, a valuable insight is provided into exactly how these correspondents sought to combat perceived injustices committed by official bodies, as well as the role that ego often played in this.

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From the Middle East to New Guinea: A Changing System of Authority

When the war was far from Australia's shores, official regulations were significantly more reserved than they subsequently became from early 1942. Wilmot, who later became a notable critic of outside infringement on his work, fondly recalled his time spent working with the Department of Information's Overseas Broadcast Unit in mid-1940. Having worked for them in Australia prior to his engagement by the ABC, Wilmot recalled that:

> We were fortunate in that during the six months I was there we were given little or no instructions as to what line in propaganda we should take. There was of course the censorship—but it was primarily concerned with preventing the release of any information liable to be of value to the enemy and preventing the broadcasting of any statement which might antagonise Japan … apart from that we had a free hand. Throughout I don't remember having to broadcast … anything to which I could not subscribe … that previous freedom couldn't have continued much longer.[663]

As noted in chapter six, even in the Middle East the members of the ABC Field Unit and Department of Information Film Unit operated with a high degree of freedom, largely deciding for themselves where and when to work. As Lawrence Cecil wrote in his report of the ABC Unit's operations in the field, 'The Unit controlled its own movements except in cases of major moves such as that to Greece … The usual practice was for the Unit … to move independently of the AIF', advising military authorities of when they intended to move to forward areas.[664] As such, Wilmot operated with a high degree of autonomy in the Middle East, with little red tape standing in his way and Cecil signing off on any notable changes of direction. 'The advantage in having this freedom of movement was considerable', Cecil noted later, 'We were permitted to take recording gear into very forward positions and recordings were actually made in front-line posts, artillery observation posts and gun positions. I think we can say that the freedom we were given was never abused'.[665]

Where complaints had arisen, however, was in relation to censorship. Writing to his brother-in-law in September 1941, for instance, Wilmot recognised that 'So far as facilities for obtaining news go, there is no complaint. I have been given every possible help; documents have been made available; I have been given transport and enough petrol; I have been given a free hand as to where I go'.[666] Issues only arose, Wilmot claimed, 'on the matter of censorship'.[667] His primary concern, however, was merely that 'copy is usually held up for some time awaiting the General's approval', rather than any real sense that censorship had significantly hampered his ability to produce the kind of material that the ABC sought from him.[668] Indeed, when *Smith's Weekly* published an article claiming that 'Brass-Hats Curse Chester Wilmot' and that 'censorship of Wilmot's recordings is quite a problem', Wilmot

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[663] Wilmot, diary, 30 Aug 1940, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 24, NLA.
[664] Lawrence H. Cecil, 'Notes on the Operation of a Broadcasting Recording Unit with a Force in the Field', Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.
[665] *Ibid*.
[666] Wilmot letter to George Bemis, 8 Sep 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 5, folder 46, NLA.
[667] *Ibid*.
[668] *Ibid*.

was the first to contact them to set the record straight.[669] Writing to the Editor, Wilmot stated that the article 'suggests that in this work, I and the Unit have been so hampered by "brass hats who administer the red tape", that we have had to resort to methods which "shock officialdom". Neither of these is true'.[670] Castigating the authors of the article, Wilmot wrote that 'this Unit has received every possible assistance on almost every occasion from the AIF … we have had complete freedom of movement … [and] have often been given prior warning of actions about to take place, so that we could be on the spot to record them'.[671] On the matter of censorship, he continued, '[it] has been exceptionally liberal, speedy and good'.[672] Though doubtless Wilmot was worried about the effect that the article might have on his relations with military authorities in the field, the letter reflects precisely what was said in subsequent reports about the Unit's activities in the Middle East. Beyond what was necessary, it seems that there was little hampering Wilmot from doing precisely what he wanted in the field.

BRASS-HATS CURSE CHESTER WILMOT

But The A.B.C. Is Proud Of Him

● BRASS-HATS who administer the red tape side of affairs in the Middle East are more scared of Chester Wilmot, 30-year-old commentator with the Australian Broadcasting Commission's Mobile Unit than of the foe.

CHESTER has a surfeit of energy and insists on going places and doing things in a way which shocks officialdom. But he gets what he wants and is building himself a nice, juicy international reputation.

And, at home, the A.B.C., usually as

thusiasm of Wilmot. The mobile section of the Unit averaged 140 miles a day in order to keep up with the action in the Western Desert. Their desert headquarters were in Ikingi Maryut, and they spent nights in dugouts, experiencing bombings and witnessing aerial combats. At Bardia, with Capt. Hurley and the Photographic Unit, Wilmot and his men were the most forward of the observation units. At Derna he followed the A.I.F. troops in a utility, writing during the night, and recording early in the morning. Recordings made in Tobruk had to be driven 80 miles to Sollum to be placed on a plane.

Outstanding among the recordings made by Wilmot during this period and

CHESTER WILMOT, an academic ace gone wrong.

Figure 17: "Brass-Hats Curse Chester Wilmot", Smith's Weekly, 13 September 1941 (Trove)

The key concern of Army authorities at this time was, quite understandably, the desire to censor overt references to the 'strength, composition, and location of forces' in correspondents' despatches, alongside any telling comments on the 'movement of troops and operations. State of supply and transport. Casualties … [and] criticisms and eulogies of a personal nature'.[673] As someone with a keen interest in and understanding of battlefield affairs, Wilmot would certainly have recognised the necessity of this while appreciating his ability to travel to and witness so many significant events of the war in the Middle East. We have seen this too in the case of the Department of Information Film Unit. To take the example of George Silk, there was a remarkable freedom to roam the region in 1940 and 1941. Due to his dysfunctional relationship with Frank Hurley, Silk sought to avoid close

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[669] *Smith's Weekly*, 13 Sep 1941, 2.
[670] Wilmot letter to the Editor, *Smith's Weekly*, 13 Oct 1941, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 27, NLA.
[671] *Ibid*.
[672] *Ibid*.
[673] Department of Army, 'Regulations for Press Correspondents Accompanying a Force in the Field Including those Representing Broadcasting Interests', Jan 1940, MP 729/7, 55/421/11, NAA (Melbourne).

interaction with him by, as I have previously noted, 'simply just not being there'.[674] 'If there was a good fight going on', Silk later claimed, 'I'd go there'.[675] He seemed to be able to do this with few repercussions. As the Unit was, in Silk's words, 'a very disorganised outfit' within which tensions ran high, Silk's sojourns in various parts of the Middle East were a regular occurrence. On one of these solitary excursions in Tobruk, Silk found himself with the Black Watch, who had arrived there in October 1941 and soon after participated in the break out from the besieged town. 'How in God's name I got to be with a company of the Black Watch, when they are breaking out from Sidi Rezegh, I don't know', Silk remembered, 'but this is what happened in the desert … I'm sure that the Department of Information must have been wondering what the hell I was doing'.[676]

This kind of freedom afforded to Silk resulted in this instance in perhaps the finest photographic work to emerge from Tobruk and its surrounding areas.[677] It was not uncommon for other members of the Film Unit to be completely unaware of Silk's movements until some time later. Returning to Cairo from Syria in June 1941, for example, Maslyn Williams noted in a letter to Les Brereton, head of the DOI's Cinema Branch, that:

> I discovered when I got here that young George was in Alex [Alexandria], so I rang through to get him to come back and go up to Syria. The front is very extended and there is much to be covered there and Damien is going to be overworked while he is alone and not able to worry much about stills. However, I discover that George is out with the Navy again.[678]

Doubtless the degree of freedom enjoyed by Silk and the Unit's other members in relation to their movements was partly a result of their status as *official* photographers. Whereas, according to the regulations issued to war correspondents in 1940, 'control of [regular] Press Correspondents … is vested in the chief field censor … [who] is to be regarded by correspondents as their commanding officer', the status of Silk and his colleagues granted them a greater degree of access on the front lines.[679] This was most likely because of the nature of their work. As they were directly employed by the government, their work was immediately available only to the Department of Information. Their primary task was 'imbued with the necessity of building up a permanent pictorial record of the war, knowing that their work will be preserved for posterity in the Australian War Memorial'.[680] This work would, of course, also be used for propaganda purposes. Given this essential nature of their work and the way in which it would be used by governmental bodies, the Unit was granted a particularly high degree of access on the front lines.

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[674] Silk interviewed by McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[675] *Ibid*.
[676] *Ibid*.
[677] Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 127.
[678] Maslyn Williams letter to Les Brereton, 18 Jun 1941, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, box 12, folder 81, NLA.
[679] Department of Army, 'Regulations for Press Correspondents Accompanying a Force in the Field Including those Representing Broadcasting Interests', Jan 1940, MP 729/7, 55/421/11, NAA (Melbourne).
[680] War Cabinet Agendum, 'Press photography in combat areas', 20 June 1944, A2670, 317/1944, NAA (Canberra).

The Unit also benefitted from not being under direct military control, a privilege that its members sought to protect. When John Treloar, for example, arrived in the Middle East in mid-1941 to 'oversee the establishment of the Military History and Information Section' (MHIS), he brought with him a concerning suggestion: the Film Unit, he argued, should be 'subsumed under direct military control' with 'all photographers, war artists, correspondents and broadcasters' being swept 'into one section based at AIF HQ at Heliopolis', just outside Cairo.[681] Treloar was operating on behalf of the Army, which had grown concerned over the Department of Information's ability, as a civilian body, to maintain adequate censorship and security in the field with its correspondents.[682] As the historian John Hilvert has argued, 'To the Armed Services, the Department represented the chief government protagonist for full disclosure and therefore posed a major security problem'.[683] Feeling their relative journalistic autonomy in the field to be under threat from the military, the members of the Film Unit set aside their personal differences to take collective action in the best interests of the group. In a letter jointly composed and signed by Hurley, Parer, Silk, Williams and Anderson, the Unit wrote to Senator Harry Foll, the Minister for Information, warning against Treloar's plans. They suggested that, were the plans to go ahead, the Film Unit would end up in a similar position to their New Zealand counterparts, who were under almost complete military control. Their 'lack of freedom', they wrote, meant that the New Zealanders 'are reduced to the unenthusiastic recording of occasional parades'.[684] Hurley also wrote directly to Les Brereton to criticise the plans. Sure enough, Brereton, who had been more than happy with the material that had so far been supplied by the Film Unit, supported his employees in their efforts to protect the status quo. 'Our war coverage has been remarkable', he wrote to Foll, 'the best in the world—and this has only been possible by permitting the photographers to move freely around'.[685] The collective voice of the Unit having been heard, they remained in the field as Department of Information employees, operating in much the same way as they had done since they first arrived in the Middle East.

These instances where war correspondents took action on behalf of the wider group would be stepped up when the Australian focus of the war shifted to the Pacific in early 1942. With the establishment of the aforementioned ADPR in January, the restrictions placed on Australian war correspondents were significantly increased. As the historian Prue Torney-Parlicki has written, they 'worked within an inordinate range of official constraints'.[686] This was partly because there existed in the Pacific a multi-layered system of control over their work.

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[681] Kevin Foster, "Re-visioning Australia's Second World War: Race Hatred, Strategic Marginalisation, and the Visual Language of the South West Pacific Campaign" in *Expressions of War in Australia and the Pacific: Language, Trauma, Memory, and Official Discourse*, eds. Amanda Laugesen and Catherine Fisher (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 133; McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 379.
[682] Ian Jackson, "'Duplication, Rivalry and Friction': The Australian Army, the Government and the Press during the Second World War" in *The Information Battlefield: Representing Australians at War*, ed. Kevin Foster (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011), 75-76.
[683] John Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors: Censorship and Propaganda in World War II* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 23.
[684] Department of Information Film Unit letter to Senator H. S. Foll, 20 Jul 1941, AWM54 773/4/2. Cited in McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 379.
[685] Les Brereton letter to Senator H. S. Foll, 7 Aug 1941, AWM54 773/4/2. Cited in McGregor, *Frank Hurley*, 380.
[686] Prue Torney-Parlicki, *Somewhere in Asia: War, Journalism, and Australia's Neighbours 1941-75* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000, 35.

Alongside the influence of the ADPR, who controlled the movement of correspondents in the field, official constraints on journalists were exacerbated by General Douglas MacArthur's assumption of command over Allied Forces in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) in April 1942. This was because it meant that Australian war correspondents were subject to three types of censorship, of both Australian and American origin, in the newly created SWPA. As Kingsley Wood, who was one of numerous Deputy Assistant Directors of Public Relations (DADPR) with the Australian forces in the field, later noted, these three types of censorship were 'that conducted in the field and administered by Army PR; service censorship, controlled by MacArthur's Headquarters, and civilian censorship, which was the responsibility of the Department of Information'.[687] This resulted in a system of control which was, in Wood's words, 'ruthless'.[688] The historian John Hilvert has observed that, as New Guinea was an Australian-administered territory with Australian censorship already in place, the imposition of MacArthur's own censorship system resulted in a highly restrictive environment for Australian journalists.[689] Because of 'Curtin's determination to maintain good relations with America and MacArthur', the US censorship system in New Guinea was there to stay, meaning that correspondents had to grapple with a wide range of limitations to their work hitherto unencountered.[690]

The imposition of the SWPA served to frustrate certain correspondents in a number of ways. As the Australian correspondent Allan Dawes recollected in a 1946 lecture about his time in the Pacific following MacArthur's tightening of restrictions:

> There was one hand-out we had to swallow during the war and that was General MacArthur's communique. Sometimes it was a bitter enough pill. Correspondents at General MacArthur's H.Q. found that the key news came to them in the communique, whether they liked it that way or not, and the background information was given them in conference … now and then, we were led up the garden.[691]

The almost total control of the dissemination of information represented by MacArthur's communiques and conferences set the tone for the remainder of the war in the Pacific. MacArthur's communiques became a major source of consternation for many war correspondents who believed that, rather than facilitating the communication of news, they were designed to obfuscate information. Writing to his wife, Osmar White complained that 'The communique edict has cut down a lot of work. MacArthur has now forbidden us even to lodge messages until the operation has been covered in the official communique'.[692] In his *New Guinea Diary*, meanwhile, George Johnston wrote in the entry for 14 September that MacArthur's communiques were 'as expressive as a deaf mute with both arms cut off'— 'there has been', he continued, a 'periodical clamping down by censorship … It merely crushes everything in these periodical outbursts, for no apparent reason, and limits news to

687 Kingsley Wood, *From Our Correspondent*, unpublished manuscript, 1966, MSS 0748, AWM.
688 *Ibid*.
689 Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*, 146.
690 *Ibid*., 145.
691 Allan Dawes, "Caesar's Ghost: The Journalist, the Statesman, the Spokesman", Arthur Norman Smith Memorial Lecture in Journalism, 6 Jul 1946.
692 White letter to Mollie White, 5 May 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.

the bare terms of the official communiques'.[693] On 16 October, meanwhile, soon after MacArthur's first visit to New Guinea earlier that month, Johnston wrote that:

> Everyone is very incensed with the new censorship bans, including MacArthur's personal censorship of stories of his visit here which have been slashed to convey the impression (a) that he went right up to the front line (which he certainly did NOT) and (b) that this was NOT his first visit to New Guinea. Censorship now is just plain Gestapo stuff![694]

Yet Johnston himself, as noted in the previous chapter, was accused by Osmar White of simply rewriting MacArthur's communiques.[695] It seems likely that in *New Guinea Diary* Johnston was attempting to present an exaggerated version of himself and his attitudes towards authority, suppressing the fact that he rarely witnessed any actual fighting in New Guinea and instead received the bulk of his information from official channels like the communique. In an article appearing in *Life* magazine in July 1943 entitled 'MacArthur: A Great American Soldier does a Great job in Southwest Pacific', Johnston endlessly praised MacArthur, noting that under his command the New Guinea campaign had been 'one of the most successful ever carried out in such difficult terrain with such paralyzing problems of supply'.[696] MacArthur, Johnston wrote enthusiastically, possessed 'the eternal enigma of genius' and was a 'warrior straight out of medieval times … a mystical figure'.[697] On the matter of censorship and press relations, Johnston gives an entirely different impression of MacArthur from the one given in *New Guinea Diary*, writing that the general's press interviews were 'utterly complete' with direct answers to journalists' questions.[698] 'There was some resentment among several war correspondents', Johnston continued, 'who insisted that MacArthur was trying to convert what was a purely Australian ground victory into a combined success. This was actually unjust. At that time it was important to prevent the Japanese from knowing that the Americans were being kept intact as a separate force to be flown into the north-coast areas for the final assault on Buna'.[699] In this Johnston was greatly understating MacArthur's determination to underplay Australian successes in New Guinea who, as the historian David Horner has written, dubiously contended 'that it was he who, after his appointment as the Allied Commander-in-Chief, decided to take the fight to the Japanese in New Guinea'.[700] Clearly Johnston was tailoring his views on the matter according to his audience and this no doubt irritated correspondents like White who, as I will shortly discuss, actively sought to push back against encroaching regulations in New Guinea.

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[693] George Johnston, *New Guinea Diary*, 152.
[694] George Johnston, *War Diary 1942* (Sydney: Collins, 1984), 110. *War Diary* is the later edited version of *New Guinea Diary*.
[695] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.
[696] *Life*, 5 Jul 1943, 104.
[697] *Ibid.*, 104.
[698] *Ibid.*, 106.
[699] *Ibid.*, 110-112.
[700] David Horner, *High Command: Australia's Struggle for an Independent War Strategy, 1939-1945* (London: Routledge, 1982), 178.

As noted in the previous chapter, Johnston saw in his role in New Guinea the opportunity to produce a book which would launch him further into the popular market after the success of books like *Grey Gladiator* and *Australia at War*. The desire for such success no doubt led Johnston to accept the official communiques and simply add colour to them rather than challenge their veracity to get to the 'real' story. Reflecting on his process in *My Brother Jack*, Johnston wrote that he:

> painted a picture in vivid colours and larger than life of this little tropical fortress of heroes, brave and unflinching and undismayed … yet the dispatches that went back under my name and the sweeping dateline of "Somewhere in New Guinea" gave only a false and highly tinted version of the truth … the falsity I built, or allowed to be built, around myself is perhaps less excusable. I wrote copiously and I wrote brilliantly … I wrote myself into my own lie, the lie that I had *had* to create, so that it was taken for granted that I was there, *right there*, in the thin red line of heroes, and gradually I picked up all the tricks of evasion and avoidance and wove them into an almost fool-proof pattern. I suffered nothing more than a spurious self-inflicted heroism.[701]

Johnston recognised with hindsight that, in failing to get a real sense of the truth underlying the information which was officially communicated to him at headquarters, his journalistic integrity in New Guinea had been questionable and that he had not sought to work around official regulations. White, meanwhile, had the opposite approach to Johnston. Writing to his wife shortly after the imposition of the SWPA, for example, he stated that:

> Within the bounds of censorship and discretion I intend to go on telling the sometimes boring and uninspiring truth … Truth doesn't scintillate, doesn't entertain, doesn't lend itself to literary tricks, doesn't reach much of an audience, doesn't convince nearly as much as it should. I must try to make it do all those things, but I shall not succeed—wholly. Who does?[702]

As noted in chapter one, it was the moral responsibility of the journalist, White believed, to first and foremost tell the reader the truth and be in possession of reliable factual material. As we have seen in the previous chapter, White found in New Guinea that the way for him to do this was to be physically present at the scene which he was writing about.

This, however, was not a straightforward process. Army bureaucracy had become increasingly paranoid in 1942 and was overpopulated by confusing acronyms. Australian war correspondents in 'areas of operations', for instance, were required to 'report their movements to D.A.D.P.R's … for reasons of security' and 'travel only by service transport', which would be provided 'by the Movement Officer only for those possessing a movement order issued by the A.D.P.R. or D.A.D.P.R.'.[703] The role of a DADPR was invested with a great amount of power in the field. All communications 'for publication in Press or for broadcasting' had to be 'handed in duplicate to the A.D.P.R. or D.A.D.P.R. of the formation',

[701] Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 309-310.
[702] White letter to Mollie White, 29 Apr 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[703] Army Directorate of Public Relations, "Advice to Accredited War Correspondents with the Australian Forces on Active Service", May 1942, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 11, folder 10, NLA.

who would then arrange for field censorship to be carried out.[704] The correspondent was then required to submit the communication to the Chief Publicity Censor. Any complaints levelled by the correspondents against this multi-layered bureaucracy would have to be submitted, unsurprisingly, to the DADPR, who would then decide whether to submit the complaint to the Director-General of Public Relations.[705] As Allan Dawes recollected in his 1946 lecture, though these field officers were at first regarded as a 'necessary evil' in New Guinea, they soon became a source of significant frustration for many correspondents as the system of control became ever more elaborate and complicated by red tape.[706] The field officers of the Army were required, Dawes continued, 'to be something of a superman. He was in the nature of a schoolmaster, scrutinising and reporting upon correspondents, eventually reading and censoring their personal mail'.[707]

The Army's navigation of the line between 'control' and 'facilitation', therefore, certainly seemed to be straying very much to one side. The assurance of the 'Advice to Accredited War Correspondents with the Australian Forces on Active Service' manual, issued in May 1942, that the 'primary function of officers of the Directorate of Public Relations is to *assist* Correspondents in obtaining information' was no doubt viewed by many journalists with the utmost suspicion.[708] The formal advice issued to them by the Army occasionally even verged on the surreal: 'Accredited Correspondents shall not join the forces of any enemy or neutral Power without the approval of the Commander-in-Chief South-West Pacific Area'.[709]

Certainly there was an encroaching feeling as the war progressed that restrictions imposed largely by the Directorate represented 'the garrotting of free speech, with Australian censorship in the dock'.[710] Voicing their concerns as a collective in June 1942, a meeting of war correspondents belonging to the AJA passed a resolution denouncing what they called 'the present trend toward a military control of the gathering and publication of news', which presented 'dangers … of a military dictatorship of public opinion and a menace to the freedom of the Press'.[711] White shared this opinion and in May 1942 was at the centre of a push to lessen the impact of restrictions imposed on war correspondents in New Guinea. In an extensive report sent to Errol G. Knox, the Director-General of Public Relations, White detailed a long list of complaints regarding the way that the Directorate oversaw its management of the press in New Guinea. 'The censorship position was so bad', he wrote, that:

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[704] "Standing Orders for Accredited War Correspondents and for Field Press Censors", Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 11, folder 10, NLA.
[705] *Ibid*.
[706] Dawes, "Caesar's Ghost".
[707] *Ibid*.
[708] Army Directorate of Public Relations, "Advice to Accredited War Correspondents with the Australian Forces on Active Service", May 1942, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 11, folder 10, NLA.
[709] "Standing Orders for Accredited War Correspondents and for Field Press Censors", Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 11, folder 10, NLA.
[710] Dawes, "Caesar's Ghost".
[711] Sydney Pratt letter to Prime Minister John Curtin, 4 Jun 1942, MP508/1, 256/701/243, NAA (Melbourne). A brief but interesting discussion concerning this appears in Ian Jackson, "Duplication, Rivalry and Friction", 76-78.

> the unpalatable truth is that the war news from the New Guinea area has not been properly covered. In my belief, the present oppressive censorship is the logical outcome of many months of official bungling and confusion. Censorship officers in the field are tired of trying to make sense out of an insane censorship 'literature' … Instructions on how to interpret censorship regulations are conflicting and follow no discernible principle or design of principles.[712]

White's complaints ranged from censorship to news gathering and the way in which information was released to the press. 'News from the three services could', he wrote, 'be gathered and checked only by frequent personal calls at all three headquarters. These calls were often useless because the officers who had the information were elsewhere when the press truck arrived'.[713] 'Beyond the general instruction to assist war correspondents in carrying our their duties', he continued, 'authorities on the mainland were quite inactive on our behalf, despite frequent appeals'.[714] The failing of war correspondents in this way by official authority represented, in White's view, a moral failing against the people of Australia. On MacArthur's communiques, for instance, White noted that they were often inaccurate and that, in severely limiting their mention of Australian losses (often to the phrase 'our losses were light'), they not only impacted the morale of the troops, who 'began to distrust all the rest of the news as inaccurate and over-optimistic', but also deceived the public who were, in any case, smart enough to know better than to believe what they were told.[715] War correspondents were being forced in essence, therefore, to give 'ill-balanced, inaccurate accounts of the situation as it really is'.[716]

Writing of this period in *Green Armour*, White noted that 'The correspondents were so dissatisfied … No good purpose could be served by our remaining at Moresby any longer. We hadn't the faintest idea of what was really going on'.[717] As a result, White and a number of other correspondents left New Guinea for Townsville on 6 May in protest over conditions. Remaining there for a month, White eventually came to the realisation that 'no war correspondent can ever tell unpalatable truths soon enough to do any good. Once news sources are officially controlled by censorships, no individual writer can deflect by as much as a hair's breadth the impact upon the public mind of the tale wartime leadership want to tell'.[718] This, no doubt, was a painful conclusion for White to draw, yet it motivated him to return to New Guinea in early June to conduct what work he could under the system, having been assured by Errol Knox that his report had been 'read with great interest' and that 'you will find that the system which is now being instituted will overcome many of the difficulties which correspondents have experienced'.[719] Though Knox provided no specifics in his letter, the fact that White was subsequently able to secure permission to make his trips along the Bulldog and Kokoda Tracks, with very little hampering him in the way of restrictions on

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[712] Osmar White, "Report on the work of war correspondents in the New Guinea area", May 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 1, NLA.
[713] *Ibid*.
[714] *Ibid*.
[715] *Ibid*.
[716] *Ibid*.
[717] White, *Green Armour*, 82.
[718] *Ibid.*, 83.
[719] Errol G. Knox letter to White, May 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 1, NLA.

these excursions, is evidence of his report having some effect. White had, the historian Neil McDonald has written, 'succeeded in creating circumstances in which his own, Wilmot's and Parer's great reporting became possible'.[720]

Having undertaken the trip along the Bulldog Track in July with Parer, White was able to write that 'I feel here that at last I'm doing something positive, potentially useful … So far the local commanding officers and I have not substantially differed in any assessment of a given situation. I am guided by them, naturally, and make what conclusion, independently, a layman can … If I can't publish the truth as I know it, I'll at least tell it as I know it'.[721] It seems, therefore, that a kind of compromise had been reached in White's case. By returning to Australia in May and filing his report about the hardships faced by war correspondents, White was taking whatever steps he felt able to make in order to improve conditions for the wider group in New Guinea. Though he oftentimes felt in competition with his peers, he recognised that the system was unreasonably restrictive towards journalists whose primary duty, White believed, was to tell the truth. By attempting to influence change, White was appealing to the best interests of all war correspondents, as well as, of course, the Australian public. It is hard to say precisely what effect White's report had, but it is significant that he received a personal reply from Knox and was subsequently able to undertake his two most notable expeditions with apparent ease. White's challenge to authority had, therefore, somewhat succeeded, no doubt in part because of his appealing to the interests of all war correspondents who were essential to the Australian coverage of the campaign.

White's complaints were later echoed in the public arena by Kenneth Slessor around the time of his resignation as Official War Correspondent in February 1944. As noted in chapter three, Slessor had long railed against censorship of all forms in his pre-war journalism, though recognised that his work in the field would be subject to military censorship. What he had not been prepared for, however, was the extent to which his words would be 'mangled' by the necessities of censorship as well as by newspaper editors in Australia. As a poet, the fact that he could not express himself in precisely the way that he intended in his war coverage was no doubt a source of tension for Slessor. Writing in his diary in May 1942 while he was still in the Middle East, for instance, Slessor noted one particularly frustrating interaction with military censorship. Having written a story about Australian air crews conducting bombing raids over Germany, Slessor brought the piece before a military censor at 11.00 a.m. The censor, Slessor wrote, presented 'all sorts of silly obstacles to it, amongst others the objection that I had revealed an earlier exploit of a man now POW, which (so the censor thought) might prejudice whatever tales he had told enemy intelligence-interrogators. I pointed out that surely it was not necessary to suppress all details of the past history of prisoners'.[722] The resultant delay in the story's dispatch to Australia meant that 'the message was still in the censor's hands at 12.30, and I had wanted it to catch the morning papers' deadline at about noon. This extraordinary delay of one and a half hours made me annoyed'.[723] Slessor's

[720] McDonald, "Reporting the Papuan Campaign", 67.
[721] White letter to Mollie White, 30 Jul 1942, White papers, MS Acc07.141, box 1, folder 4, NLA.
[722] Slessor diary, 14 May 1942, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 387.
[723] *Ibid.*, 387.

primary complaint here was the fact that it took what seems like a reasonable amount to time to censor a despatch containing some sensitive details, resulting in his missing a deadline. Nevertheless, his frustrations were certainly building up, meaning that by the time he reached New Guinea in May 1943, with his position increasingly irrelevant, Slessor was readily willing to openly challenge the restrictions placed on him and other war correspondents.

This came to a head in late 1943 following Slessor's reporting of the fighting around Finschhafen, where he had witnessed action from late September to early October. Having subsequently been interviewed by the Sydney *Sunday Sun* about the fighting there, Slessor gave a stark depiction of the reality of the Finschhafen battle which was criticised by Brigadier Victor Windeyer. Nevertheless, the interview had passed General Headquarters censorship in Sydney. This precipitated a furious row, with Windeyer lodging a formal complaint with Colonel John Rasmussen, who had recently become the Director-General of Army Public Relations, replacing Errol Knox, about Slessor's interview. Slessor, angry that his integrity had been called into question by military authorities, wrote exasperatedly in his diary that 'The whole thing disgusts me—it is typical of the petty army-mind … One never hears any appreciation of correspondents' work from the Army—all that comes is contemptuous or intolerant criticism'.[724] Slessor, it seems, was a man at the end of his tether, now determined to hit back at military authorities who, he believed, were muzzling him. When Rasmussen wrote to the Department of Information demanding that Slessor's accreditation as a war correspondent be withdrawn, claiming that Slessor's 'attitude of mind … coupled with the serious inaccuracies contained in his statement to the Sun, makes him totally unacceptable as official war correspondent', the row reached boiling point.[725] With the Department suggesting that he might consider taking a job with their New York office to get out of the military firing line, Slessor jumped before he was pushed, formally resigning on 21 February 1944.[726]

Slessor, however, was determined to air his grievances publicly, seeking to tar the ADPR in the minds of the Australian people. He did this by framing his conflict with military authority in terms of his and other war correspondents' struggles to tell the true story of the heroism of the Australian troops. Their efforts to do this, he claimed, were unfairly hampered by over-regulation and unnecessarily strict censorship. Slessor made this case in his resignation letter, claiming that:

> It is a bitter disappointment to be forced to abandon my sincere efforts to present a true picture of the Australian fightingman—for whom I have so great an admiration. It is equally disappointing to realise, after 4 years' struggle against frustration, that between the story of the Australian fightingman and the people at home there stands a

[724] Slessor diary, 18 Nov 1943, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 531-532.
[725] Colonel John Rasmussen letter to E. G. Bonney, 1 Dec 1943. Cited in Semmler, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 585.
[726] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 246.

> little wall of self-inflated, regulation-bound jealous and self-aggrandising petty officials—many of them proficient neither as soldiers nor as newspapermen.[727]

Now free to make his case in the papers, Slessor adopted a similar line of attack, stating in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that his resignation represented a protest against 'the whole of the present attitude and working of the Army Public Relations Branch'.[728] The Directorate, he claimed, had 'forgotten its original purpose of helping correspondents, and now apparently went out of its way on occasions to intimidate or actively hamper men who were doing a difficult job under most difficult conditions'.[729] The conflict between war correspondents and military authority, he continued, was essentially a struggle to tell the 'truth' about Australia's heroic fighting men:

> I have tried to do my level best as an Official War Correspondent for the last four years. I am bitterly disappointed that I am now forced to give up the struggle to tell in my own way the story of the Australian fighting man, for whom I have so deep an admiration.[730]

In standing up for himself in this matter, Slessor was also, he claimed, standing up for the interests of the entire war correspondent community. 'I am in a position to resist intimidation', he stated, 'Private correspondents dependent on the Army's blessing to keep their jobs are not. I have sufficient evidence in my records to show, at the right time, that there is something gravely wrong with the present organisation of Army Public Relations'.[731]

There was certainly some sincerity in Slessor's efforts to improve conditions for other war correspondents following his resignation. Writing in the pages of his former employer, *Smith's Weekly*, he noted that 'I have resigned of my own free will, as a protest against injustice'.[732] Though he would certainly have been forced out of his role had he not already resigned, his efforts to 'protest against injustice' lend an interesting angle to the affair. Certainly some real action was taken as a result of Slessor's efforts. Largely as a result of his public feud with the ADPR, the Canberra branch of the AJA convened a meeting in early March 1944 in which evidence was heard from various war correspondents (whose identity was kept anonymous), including Slessor, concerning their treatment by the Army. The General Secretary of the AJA, Sydney Pratt, wrote to Slessor that month confirming receipt of the testimony, asking 'what action (if any) you wish Federal Executive to take in the matter'.[733] Slessor replied that:

> The Executive could powerfully support war correspondents, and possibly obtain better treatment for them from the Army, by sending its official protest to the acting Prime Minister and Minister for the Army, and also to the Commander-in-Chief, with

[727] Slessor resignation letter, 21 Feb 1944. Cited in Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 250.
[728] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Feb 1944, 7.
[729] *Ibid*.
[730] *Ibid*.
[731] *Ibid*.
[732] *Smith's Weekly*, 11 Mar 1944, 4.
[733] Sydney Pratt letter to Slessor, 23 Mar 1944, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 1, folder 1, NLA.

> a request that the present administrative heads of Army Public Relations branch be changed to officers more sympathetically inclined to newspapermen.[734]

Clearly there was a genuine engagement by Slessor to help improve conditions for war correspondents. Though he was primarily motivated by his desire to justify his own work and actions in the press, he invoked the collective experiences of war correspondents to help make the case that military authority, as he believed, had encroached too far on the ability of correspondents to do their work effectively. What the outcome of this ultimately was it is hard to say (though it seems that negligible difference was actually made to working conditions), but what is significant is Slessor's framing of his own frustrations as an embodiment of the collective war correspondent struggles against censorship and over-regulation. Having been concerned about censorship in Australia long before the start of the war, following his resignation Slessor was free to argue against this particularly stringent form of it faced by journalists, many of whom were risking their lives in areas of conflict.

In this way, Slessor's resignation is an interesting case study of the individual's response to official authority invoking the collective experience of their peers. The same tactic had been employed with some success by White nearly two years prior in New Guinea. Having seen the system of censorship and regulation expanded in early 1942, the gradual tightening of restrictions imposed on war correspondents was often met by appeals to their journalistic duty to 'tell the truth' and, further to this, celebrate the heroism and endurance of the Australian troops. The need for some degree of field censorship and regulation was certainly appreciated by the correspondents considered here, with arrangements on these matters largely going unchallenged in the Middle East. When, however, it was felt that encroaching military control represented a challenge to their ability to conduct their work in the manner that they expected, action could be taken in the form of reports, appeals to relevant authority figures, of taking matters public. As will be seen later in this chapter with the resignations of Silk and Parer, when these disputes were aired in the press for all to see, grievances which were once made privately were given valuable oxygen and legitimacy by being brought into a public arena.

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[734] Slessor letter to Sydney Pratt, 30 Mar 1944, Slessor papers, MS 3020, box 1, folder 1, NLA.

‘A Dangerous Subversive and a Communist’: The Disaccreditation of Chester Wilmot

Perhaps even more notable than Slessor’s resignation was the removal of Chester Wilmot’s accreditation as a war correspondent by General Thomas Blamey in November 1942. Blamey, who labelled Wilmot ‘a dangerous subversive and a communist’ after the affair, had become the focus of much of Wilmot’s criticisms during the New Guinea campaign.[735] Wilmot had fully inserted himself in the quarrel which erupted between Blamey and Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell following Rowell’s removal as commander of New Guinea Force in September. Wilmot was a close ally and personal friend of Rowell, though in taking such an active role in military affairs he undoubtedly transgressed the line between journalist and participant.[736] Wilmot’s swift ejection from New Guinea was demonstrative of the power of official authority if, as was Blamey’s opinion in this case, it was pushed too far by overly-involved war correspondents.

Given the nature of Wilmot’s journey along the Kokoda Track with White and Parer in August and September, witnessing first-hand the conditions faced by the troops and the complexion of the fighting, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rowell saw in Wilmot someone who was capable of conveying crucial information to himself and his staff in Port Moresby. Rowell had known Wilmot since their time in the Middle East and recognised his capacity to analyse and understand military affairs. As such, as the historian Neil McDonald has written, Rowell looked upon Wilmot as a kind of ‘unofficial liaison officer’.[737] ‘The problem was’, as Lieutenant-General Gordon Darling recalled, ‘that we didn’t have a full corps headquarters and only one liaison officer … [Wilmot and Parer] were so much more alert and fit, and had some military nous’.[738] Beyond this, Rowell also recognised the significance of press coverage in getting a reliable story of the conditions that he and his forces were faced with in New Guinea into the public domain. Writing to Wilmot after the war, Rowell stated that war correspondents like him had ‘taught us jungle soldiers that press publicity is an essential factor in war. I believe that I saw this very clearly at an early date in the last war and that the Press Broadcasters got all the information I could give them’.[739]

It is understandable that Wilmot and Rowell were drawn to each other, both recognising the benefits that cooperation between them could bring. Rowell could look to Wilmot for reliable information about conditions on the ground. Having witnessed the fighting around Isurava in early September, Wilmot was requested by Rowell to write a report of his findings there. The resultant report, ‘Observations on Operations of Maroubra Force’, was a significant moment in Wilmot’s career as a war correspondent. Rather than simply witnessing and reporting on events, he was now directly involved in them and being consulted on official military matters. This, it seems, was something that Wilmot had actively sought out and contemplated.

[735] Cited in McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 302.
[736] Wilmot and Rowell maintained regular friendly correspondence after the war until Wilmot’s death in 1954. See Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 19, folder 87, NLA.
[737] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 245.
[738] Lieutenant-General Gordon Darling, Aid-de-Camp to Rowell, cited in *Ibid.*, 245.
[739] Sydney Rowell letter to Wilmot, 15 Dec 1947, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 19, folder 87, NLA.

'Because [they] are more independent than Army officers and because they have wider contacts', he wrote:

> correspondents … find themselves occasionally consulted on quite important matters of policy. Consequently they learn more about the inside of the Army than even many senior officers. Inevitably on the basis of that knowledge they form opinions. As they alone among those in the field have some freedom of action, there is, I believe, some responsibility on them to use that freedom of action in what they believe to be the national interest.[740]

Wilmot's report reflected this desire to communicate his knowledge in a way that would make an active difference to events on the battlefield. He railed against the 'disorganisation of supply' for the troops and, along with White (who wrote an article on the subject) and Parer, pushed the case for green camouflage uniforms to be used in the jungle.[741] Rowell sought to have the report circulated within the ranks of the Army, however Blamey, suspicious of Wilmot's growing involvement in military affairs and concerned that any failings it highlighted could be associated with himself, suppressed the report.[742] This, Wilmot believed, was typical of the obstructions to his work in New Guinea, which had become increasingly filled with the kind of criticisms highlighted in the Maroubra report. Writing in protest to the ADPR on 18 September, he complained about a script that he had submitted for censorship ten days prior entitled 'New Threat to New Guinea'. The script, he complained, had been unnecessarily delayed by Army censorship before it was passed, and even then had been subject to various changes. 'The cuts and alterations are rather puzzling', Wilmot wrote … 'The final cut was even more inexplicable … If there is any logic in this it has escaped me'.[743] Writing to Bearup at the ABC, meanwhile, he reported that:

> As it is now the censorship is so strict that I am getting little through … Rowell has been granting me a private interview at least twice a week, so that I have the full background. In view of this it is unfortunate that so little is getting through from here and that the News Service is forced to rely on the despatches from GHQ which have frequently been inaccurate.[744]

Frustrated that his observations and complaints seemed to be falling on deaf ears, when rumours began to circulate that Rowell was to be relieved of his command Wilmot directly attacked Blamey. When Blamey arrived in New Guinea at the request of MacArthur on 12 September, Wilmot challenged him at a press conference over the failure to adopt the use of green uniforms. Blamey's response was to simply state that the present khaki uniforms 'had been designed in India, and that he had no evidence that the jungle in Papua was any different'.[745] Wilmot's subsequent report, 'Observations on the New Guinea Campaign, 26 August to 26 September 1942', was a thinly veiled critique of Blamey's leadership. Repeating his claims that troops and supplies had been dispatched to New Guinea too late, as

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[740] Cited in McDonald, *Chester Wilmot Reports*, 317.
[741] Chester Wilmot, "Observations on Operations of Maroubra Force", in *Ibid.*, 305-316.
[742] *Ibid.*, 317.
[743] Wilmot letter to ADPR, 18 Sep 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.
[744] Wilmot letter to T. W. Bearup, 21 Sep 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 8, folder 23, NLA.
[745] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 271.

well as noting failures in equipment and uniforms, Wilmot was increasingly flirting with danger.[746]

Having replaced Rowell with Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring at the end of September, Blamey set his sights on Wilmot. Wilmot had recently begun to investigate and openly discuss Blamey's alleged corrupt involvement in a deal relating to film screenings for troops in Palestine.[747] This ultimately proved to be the final straw for Blamey, who removed Wilmot's accreditation as a war correspondent on 1 November, noting that his actions resulted in 'an attack to undermine and destroy the authority of the Commander-in-Chief … [in a] subversive way'.[748]

Figure 18: Blamey (left) with Rowell (right) and Percy Spender (Minister for the Army), Palestine, 2 January 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

Commenting on the story shortly before his own departure as a war correspondent, Slessor noted that Wilmot's disaccreditation by Blamey was 'an amazing story in which it appears that Blamey stifled Wilmot after the latter had begun investigating finances etc. of Australian cinemas in Palestine camps'.[749] Certainly Wilmot had been stifled by Blamey, though it is evident that, in trying to use whatever means available to him to challenge the general's authority, he had pushed his luck too far. Writing to his father soon after his disaccreditation, he stated that:

> I have a clear conscience for I feel that when faced with a test in which I had to choose between doing what I thought was right and risking my job – and doing what I

[746] Chester Wilmot, "Observations on the New Guinea Campaign, 26 August to 26 September 1942", Sir Sydney Rowell papers, 3DRL 6763, Item 9, AWM.
[747] John Hetherington, *Blamey: Controversial Soldier* (Canberra: AWM, 1973), 401-403.
[748] Cited in *Ibid.*, 402.
[749] Slessor diary, 31 Jan 1944, *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 555.

knew to be cowardly and keeping it – I have taken the risk … I have no self recriminations except I might have been shrewder and more discreet but that is the fault of a young man in a hurry.[750]

Yet Wilmot was clearly deeply upset over the removal of his accreditation, writing to his family sometime later that, now he was back working for the ABC in Australia, he missed his work in the war zone. 'I've grown up with this show', he wrote, 'my best friends are there'.[751] Wilmot's work as a war correspondent had fulfilled his ambitions to witness and report on events of historical significance, but by becoming a highly active participant in events in New Guinea he had, in a way, self-sabotaged his career. His involvement raises questions about what Kate McLaughlin has called 'the degree of participation that is possible and fitting on the part of the war correspondent': 'What (if any)', she asks, 'should be the extent and nature of the intervention he or she makes in the conflict being reported? And what concrete results might war journalism be expected to achieve?'.[752] It appears to me that, in the excitement of being involved in high level military affairs, Wilmot may have lost sight of his journalistic responsibilities, which were fundamentally to report news of events and convey an impression of the fighting to audiences at home. His participation meant that he could have no claim to journalistic objectivity, so far as this was possible in a conflict zone. Though he was later employed by the BBC as a war correspondent from late 1943 in preparation for the Allied invasion of Europe, his ejection from New Guinea must have been a sobering moment for someone who had witnessed most of the major Australian actions of the war.

This certainly comes through in Wilmot's report to the ABC concerning the removal of his accreditation which, he hoped, might be reinstated. Noting Blamey's hostility towards Rowell, he wrote that 'My friendship with General Rowell from whom all correspondents had received much help here and in the Middle East, apparently made me suspect also'.[753] 'My interest in General Rowell's cause', he continued, 'was not based merely on personal grounds, though I did feel that he was being unjustifiably victimized. It was based on much broader considerations of general national interest. These led me to take action in a matter which may be considered a mere army affair, but which I regarded as of national interest far transcending the immediate personal issues involved'.[754] By invoking this defence, Wilmot sought to depict Blamey's act of removing a free-thinking and experienced journalist from an area where that journalist had every right to be as explicitly dictatorial and contrary to the national interest. Continuing his attack, he stated that 'Quite apart from the loss of General Rowell, the national issue, I believe, is this. In two years with the AIF I have come to realize that the Australian Forces are seriously handicapped by the widespread lack of faith in General Blamey'.[755] Blamey's unpopular leadership, he asserted, was a danger to the

[750] Wilmot letter to father, Nov 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 6, folder 2, NLA.
[751] Wilmot letter to family, cited in McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 292.
[752] Kate McLoughlin, "War in Print Journalism", in *The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, ed. Kate McLoughlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 52.
[753] Chester Wilmot, "Withdrawal of My Accreditation", SP300/4, NAA (Sydney).
[754] *Ibid*.
[755] *Ibid*.

Australian forces, and correspondents had a duty to make this known. 'This involves a correspondent's freedom of enquiry into matters of public interest', he wrote:

> Correspondents recognize the Army's right to restrict by censorship what is published or broadcast. But to my knowledge this is the first time that the Army has tried to restrict enquiry by taking disciplinary action. Throughout the Middle East campaigns it was generally recognized that there was nothing to stop a correspondent gathering material and submitting it for censorship.[756]

Wilmot's removal as an Australian war correspondent, therefore, opens an interesting discussion concerning the ethics of journalism from a war zone. By inserting himself into the conflict between Rowell and Blamey, Wilmot was no longer a mere observer of events. Having developed a detailed knowledge of battlefield issues and tactics, he certainly enjoyed the ability to have his voice heard by someone like Rowell and, therefore, make an active difference in events. But Wilmot was, after all, just a broadcaster. While it is understandable that he would have concerns regarding censorship and over-regulation and seek workarounds for these, his alliance with Rowell represented a transgression from the realm of journalism to subjective participant—he had, in this sense, crossed an ethical line. Writing to Wilmot after the war, Rowell recollected that 'you had your own private war with Blamey and as long as you were seeking the truth it was inevitable that you would clash with him'.[757] No doubt that the pursuit of the 'truth' contributed to Wilmot feeling that he was entirely justified in his intervention in military affairs in New Guinea. The result of this, however, was the loss of his job and the subsequent relegation to giving talks on the ABC from Australia based on information provided by those still in New Guinea. In seeking much more than just 'the story' in New Guinea, Wilmot had pushed official authority too far, to the point that it backfired on his own ability to report from the war zone. His disaccreditation was, therefore, a warning to those who poked the bear just a little too hard.

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[756] *Ibid*.
[757] Sydney Rowell letter to Wilmot, 15 Dec 1947, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 19, folder 87, NLA.

Mobilising the Press: The Resignations of George Silk and Damien Parer, 1943

The resignations of George Silk and Damien Parer from the Department of Information in 1943 are an interesting case study of journalist collective action against perceived injustice. Silk's resignation to join the American *Life* magazine, followed by the sacking of Alan Anderson, precipitated a bitter public feud between the Department on one hand, and the relevant war correspondents and much of the press on the other. The elongated struggle, which was exacerbated by Parer's resignation to join Paramount News USA, was essentially the result of two things: money and the perception of over-regulation.

In January 1943, when Silk was in hospital recovering from tropical ulcers on his legs following his coverage of action in Buna and Gona, Errol Knox complained to Bob Hawes, Secretary of the Department, that 'Lt-Col Fenton, A.D.P.R. New Guinea Force, has had occasion unofficially to report to me certain irregularities in the matter of correspondents, both local, overseas and official'.[758] Knox's primary complaint concerned Silk, who had been found by Field Censorship to have mailed a personal letter using an official military envelope (breaking regulations) which disclosed information concerning numbers of casualties. Knox put pressure on Hawes to take action against Silk, stating that the 'use of official envelopes for personal mail is regarded as a serious offence in an operational area and premature disclosure of the extent of our casualties is a grave Field Censorship breach. In the case of a serving soldier such offences would lead to severe disciplinary action'.[759] Hawes assured Knox, who as Director of Army Public Relations was his superior in matters concerning official censorship, that 'I take a very serious view, and will take suitable action against Silk immediately he is discharged from hospital'.[760]

This incident, which was certainly a clear breach of Army protocol, provided ammunition to Hawes in the bitter dispute that followed. This concerned a more serious breach of censorship regulations by Silk, revolving primarily around two of his photographs from the Buna area: the now famous 'fuzzy wuzzy angel' shot from Christmas Day 1942, and a photograph of a machine-gunner flanked by the dead body of an Australian soldier, taken during the height of the fighting outside Buna. Of the second photo, Silk later noted that 'I realised I was watching what I had read about in the Great War. Before I knew it I was on my feet taking a shot—it was crazy but at the time I felt I had to—it was what I was there for'.[761] Silk recognised these photographs as some of his best work. The Department, however, would not for the time being release these shots: by clearly depicting the bodies of dead Australian soldiers, publication of the second photograph would have broken censorship regulations, while it was feared that the first photograph could have an undesirable effect on morale.[762] The artist in Silk, however, was desperate for his greatest work to be seen, recalling that 'I

[758] Errol G. Knox letter to Bob Hawes, 21 Jan 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[759] *Ibid*.
[760] Bob Hawes letter to Errol G. Knox, 22 Jan 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[761] Silk cited in McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 274.
[762] A. M. McDonald letter to Bob Hawes, 8 Feb 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney); Silk interviewed by McDonald, S00379, AWM.

felt that I had done my bit better than I ever thought I could do it, in taking these pictures, and was incensed that they wouldn't release them … it really ate at me'.[763] When his friend and fellow war correspondent with the American *Time* and *Life* magazines, Bill Chickering, encouraged him to forward one of the photographs to American censorship for eventual publication in *Life*, therefore, Silk jumped at the chance.

Silk later likened the events that followed this to the bursting of a dam.[764] Having smuggled copies of the prints out of the DOI lab in Sydney, Silk entrusted the 'fuzzy wuzzy angel' shot to Chickering, who brought it to the South-West Pacific Area censors in Brisbane, where it was soon passed. No doubt Chickering, who was later killed in January 1945 in Lingayen Gulf, sensed a major coup in *Life*'s acquisition of the photograph before any Australian publications. The editors of *Life* were so impressed with the photograph that they soon featured it as a one-page spread in their 'Week's Events' column of the 8 March 1943 issue, with Silk being credited by name.[765] When issues of the magazine reached Australia, there was some consternation from the newspapers that the Department had not made the image available at home first. This was a striking example of the often confusing duality of the Department's role as an institution responsible for both censorship and publicity, ultimately undermining their popular credibility. As John Hilvert has argued, the confusion that arose from these oftentimes contradictory responsibilities meant that the Department of Information 'acquired a poor reputation. It was at one time or another berated by politicians, the press, the public, the government and the military services'.[766] The suppression and eventual publication in America of Silk's photograph was a prime example of this, and helped to trigger a major public feud, at the centre of which were Silk, Parer, and Alan Anderson (who had been the DOI Film Unit's sound engineer in the Middle East).

When the Department subsequently agreed to send a series of photographs to *Life*, Silk attempted to include the picture of an Australian machine-gunner flanked by the dead body of his comrade.[767] Of the picture, Silk later recalled in a rather cold and dispassionate manner that 'I understood that you couldn't use dead bodies, and so I tried to get part of the dead body in, but not the whole thing. I could argue with them that it was only half a dead body'.[768] Certainly it appears that Silk was placing his art, and his desire for it to be seen, above all other concerns and overlooking basic regulations which prohibited the publication of such photographs. Even after the war he seemed baffled and uncaring when he noted that the Department 'carefully sat there and censored the pictures! … [they] said, "They're not fit and proper pictures! This guy has a mother. You can't publish his picture, what will his mother say? What will she think?" Well, you know, that's what the war was about'.[769] Yet Silk surely knew that, as the historian Prue Torney-Parlicki has written, from 'the war's

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[763] Silk interviewed by McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[764] *Ibid*.
[765] *Life* 14, no. 10, 8 Mar 1943, 36.
[766] Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*, 5.
[767] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 274. McDonald incorrectly asserts, however, that the photograph contains two dead bodies, as opposed to one.
[768] Silk cited in McDonald and Brune, *200 Shots*, 149.
[769] *Ibid*., 149.

outset all civilian and military photography was to be tightly controlled', with any photographs which 'could prejudice the effective prosecution of the war' being censored.[770] It could not have come as a surprise to him that the Department sought to suppress the pictures.

Figure 19: Silk's suppressed image of a dead Australian soldier, Buna, 1 January 1943 (George Silk, AWM)

Silk seems also to have failed to recognise that, as Jessica Fishman has written, photographs of dead bodies are very uncommonly published by the media and governmental organisations. 'Despite a purported epidemic of "graphic" death spectacles, images of the corpse, also called postmortem pictures, are actually exceedingly rare'.[771] Kevin Williams has also noted the ethical implications of the photojournalist trying to get such photographs published, asking 'Should graphic pictures of the dead be shown? Should the grief of families who have lost loved ones on the battlefield be intruded on?'.[772] Extraordinary photographs though they no doubt were, Silk seems to have had little regard for the ethical implications of his work, seeking merely to have his 'art' seen. By refusing to allow publication, the Department deepened the growing divide between itself and the bloody-minded photographer. Certainly from the Department's perspective, as Fay Anderson has written, the publication of photographs depicting the Australian dead would subvert the heroic narrative

[770] Prue Torney-Parlicki, "'Grave Security Obligations': The Australian Government's Refusal to Accredit Newspaper Photographers to Combat Areas During the Second World War", *War & Society* 16, no. 1 (1998): 109.
[771] Jessica M. Fishman, *Death Makes the News: How the Media Censor and Display the Dead* (NY: New York University Press, 2017), 3.
[772] Williams, "Something More Important than Truth", 154.

that they sought to convey of the Australian fighting man—even pictures of the wounded, she writes, 'were usually only published when they were accorded with heroic iconography' (a point which will be developed in the next chapter).[773]

By April, Silk had returned to hospital in Melbourne. From there he wrote to Hawes, complaining of the 'succession of illnesses' which he had been subjected to, noting that 'This time it is pretty serious malaria, and may last some time'.[774] Owing to this, he claimed, 'I hereby ask you to accept my resignation as a Department of Information officer', adding in a rather unbecoming manner 'P.S. I would appreciate an immediate reply'.[775] Given the recent history of tension between Silk and the Department, the official response to his resignation letter was surprisingly generous. As the DOI's Administrative Officer in Melbourne noted:

> I have approved of Silk's resignation. However, there is one thing we should have our minds clear on. He was very courageous in the field and is suffering the after-effects of a strenuous period in New Guinea. He has fever and may be very depressed, and the resignation may come out of this state of depression. I would like to feel sure in my mind that the resignation is the result of a cold decision rather than the result of his illness.[776]

This was advice heeded by Hawes, who had proven in the recent past that he did not have a tin ear to the welfare and fruitful working relationships of the war correspondents under him. Writing in October 1942, for example, Hawes stressed that 'I think it would be a good idea to continue the association of Parer and Silk by allowing them to work as a team … If Mr. Silk wishes to take a few days leave, and he can be spared, this should be arranged'.[777] What Silk had not yet confessed was that, following the incident concerning *Life*, the magazine had offered him a higher-earning job as a war correspondent in Europe. To take up this offer, Silk first needed to resign from the Department and apply for reaccreditation as a war correspondent. The person in charge of handling his application was Bob Hawes who, having initially felt some sympathy for Silk's position, was now provoked into a fit of rage. The official response of the Department was damning of Silk, highlighting his past transgressions. In a letter informing him of Silk's actions following the revelation of his desire to take up employment with *Life*, Hawes was briefed that:

> for some time Silk has been supplying prints of photographs taken by him to Life and it may, I would think, be assumed he has been receiving payment therefor. One of the conditions under which Silk (and, of course, others) accepted appointment as Official Cinematographer and Photographer was that he was required to devote himself entirely to cinematographic and photographic work on behalf of the Department of Information and to do no private work whatever. Another undertaking was that all cinema and photographic negatives taken by him will become the exclusive property

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[773] Fay Anderson, "'Celebrating the Anzac Spirit': The Visual Representation and Censorship of the Australian Soldier" in *The Visual Politics of War: Volume Two: Truth and Lies of Soft Power*, eds. Ibrahim Saleh and Thomas Knieper (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 49-50.

[774] Silk letter to Bob Hawes, 2 Apr 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).

[775] *Ibid*.

[776] F. Taylor letter to unknown, 8 Apr 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).

[777] Bob Hawes letter to F. Taylor, 8 Oct 1942, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).

> of the Department of Information and shall be released only through the Department of Information.[778]

The Minister for the Department, Senator William Ashley, meanwhile, stressed Silk's flouting of regulations and dishonesty in his correspondence. In a letter to Percy Spender, a former Minister for the Army who had been supportive of Silk owing to the 'very good job' that he would be able to do 'for Australia with the American public', he emphasised that the Department had shown compassion to Silk in accounting for possible depression being the reason behind his resignation, before going on to state that 'There is no question of incompatibility between Mr. Silk and Mr. Hawes. Mr. Hawes merely regarded Silk as a headstrong boy, who was very difficult to handle'.[779] Ashley resurrected Silk's recent history of rule-breaking:

> Hawes, after Silk's return, had occasion to reprimand him on two matters. One was a complaint by Army that Silk sent out of New Guinea, in an [official] envelope, information which endangered security. The second was when Silk attempted to send through the mail to "Life" in America a photograph of an Australian machine-gunner, killed in action, beside his gun.[780]

Hawes raised the same complaints to Colonel LeGrande Diller, General MacArthur's Public Relations Officer in the South-West Pacific Area, forwarding to him the letter of complaint he had received from Knox about Silk's actions in January.[781] Clearly the Department was determined to disrupt Silk's transfer to *Life*, with Hawes going so far as to threaten that before his application for reaccreditation with Allied Headquarters could be considered, his resignation from the Department would first have to be assessed by Manpower, even though Silk was a New Zealand national. In effect, Hawes was suggesting that Silk could be forced into the Army.[782] If relations between Silk and the Department had completely broken down prior to this threat, the suggestion that he could be subject to the Manpower Act in Australia only rubbed salt into the wound. 'I am astonished to find you taking this attitude', Silk wrote to Hawes, 'If you make it completely impossible for me to join LIFE, I will willingly serve with one of the forces … [but] as a New Zealand subject, I may use my rights, and return there, automatically coming under the Military Act—or serving as a photographer to the N.Z. Government, who have been for some time offering me a position. I may even join the staff of LIFE from there'.[783] He added to this that in working for *Life*, he 'might be able to do an even greater service for Australia'.[784]

On top of this bitter dispute with Silk, the Department soon found itself in contention with Alan Anderson and Damien Parer. Anderson, who was by this time a cameraman on

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[778] F. Taylor letter to Bob Hawes, 5 May 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[779] Percy Spender letter to Senator W. P. Ashley, 24 May 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney); Senator W. P. Ashley letter to Percy Spender, 3 Jun 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[780] Senator W. P. Ashley letter to Percy Spender, 3 Jun 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[781] Bob Hawes letter to Colonel LeGrande Diller, 12 Jun 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[782] Bob Hawes letter to Senator W. P. Ashley, 5 May 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[783] Silk letter to Bob Hawes, 14 May 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[784] *Ibid*.

assignment in Townsville and Darwin, was sacked by the Department earlier in 1943 as, it was claimed, he had abandoned his post to travel to Sydney, where his wife was heavily pregnant. In an appeal to Ashley, Anderson complained against the 'severity of the punishment which has been meted out to me by Mr Hawes', noting that his camera equipment had been faulty and that he needed to travel to Sydney to have it repaired.[785] This fell on deaf ears. At the same time, Parer, who was in Port Moresby along with Kenneth Slessor, began to voice complaints over his salary and expenses. Being particularly close to Silk and Anderson, he had watched on while his friends became embroiled in their disputes with the Department, offering them support and words of encouragement.

Parer became the de facto leader of the trio, regularly writing letters to the others which offered advice and solidarity, while simultaneously leading a press campaign against the Department. Anderson kept these letters, and reading through them one gets the sense that they are addressed not only to Silk and himself, but also to the future historian. Parer was meticulous in explaining and re-explaining to his friends precisely why he had grown tired of the Department and what course of action he was taking. There were three reasons for his dissatisfaction:

> (1) 25 shillings a week living expenses is absurd. (2) They sacked the most loyal and conscientious cameraman they ever had—Alan Anderson—with quite unjustified cause, and he's a cobber of mine. (3) They have sabotaged George Silk's opportunities of working with Time Life. Before they knew that he had a position with Time Life they were willing to let him go, but as soon as they realised he would work for them they refused to let him go, and he's a cobber of mine.[786]

Writing to Anderson soon after his sacking, Parer expressed his 'sorrow' at 'the treatment meted out to you', and confessed that he felt 'disturbed' by the restrictions placed on Silk.[787] Through mid-1943 these letters consisted of repetitive tirades, occasionally rather childish, against the Department, and the careful formulating of a plan to combat what they viewed as its overtly domineering nature. 'I'm totally fed up with them', Parer wrote to both Silk and Anderson:

> They stink! And you can quote me to anyone on that point—the press boys up here are getting a little tired of me talking about this bastardry … There is one reason I'd like to go the Sydney office [of the DOI] now though and that is that I'm constipated at present and to go and meet them gives me the shits, so it would be beneficial in some small measure.[788]

Shortly after sending this letter Parer handed in his notice. Seeking to capitalise on the high profile that he had built for himself, particularly after the release of *Kokoda Front Line*, he

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785 Alan Anderson letter to Senator W. P. Ashley, 8 Mar 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 3, SLNSW.

786 Parer letter to Anderson and Silk, 20 May 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.

787 Parer letters to Anderson, 14 Feb 1943 and 20 May 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.

788 Parer letter to Anderson and Silk, 20 May 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.

was now determined to air the trio's grievances in a public forum. 'We have put up with such a muddling, mean policy from potential bureaucratic dictators', he wrote to Anderson, 'that it's time they were exposed for the country to see them in their true colours'.[789] Parer intended the affair to become a bitter public feud, played out in the newspapers. In the same letter, Parer stated to Anderson that '[you] were too weak with them—you weren't appreciated because you didn't stab them in the back. That's the only language they know'.[790] So that each of their cases might be heard publicly and recognised as being symptomatic of the cynical and controlling measures exercised by the Department, Parer sought to take collective action against them. This meant that the newspapers would have to be mobilised to their advantage. To do this Parer enlisted the help of his brother, Alphonse, who was the licensee of the Plaza Hotel in central Sydney. This brought Alphonse into regular contact with politicians and journalists, and over time he established a network of contacts which he was able to draw upon.[791]

With Alphonse serving as a *de facto* 'PR man' for the trio, articles soon began appearing in the papers which lamented the treatment of Australia's greatest photographers at the hands of a faceless bureaucracy. One article printed in the *Daily Telegraph*, under the headline 'Loss of Ace "Dept's Fault": Brother Declares Cameraman Fed Up', quoted Alphonse's comments that the loss of Parer and Silk was due to 'Official "pin-pricking and parsimony"'.[792] Alphonse had even 'written to the Prime Minister … asking for permission to put his brother's case' in person, a request which was rejected: 'I want the public to know that my brother is being forced out of the department', Alphonse noted, 'My brother is not interested in money. He wants nothing better than to continue working for Australia with the Department of Information. But he is fed-up with the pin-pricking, humbugging, and organisational bungling by some officers of the department'.[793] Certainly this was in tune with criticisms which had been levelled at the Department almost from its foundation. As Paul Hasluck has written, even by early 1941 the Department 'had entered the thickets of criticism that surrounded it throughout the war. In the press it was alleged to be superfluous, overstaffed and clumsy in its methods'.[794] This was certainly one line of attack adopted by those like Alphonse.

The defence of the cameramen was built on the fact that they had been exemplary in their service of Australia, capturing vital images that depicted and preserved the heroism of Australian troops. In return for this service, it was claimed, they were now being betrayed by their bureaucratic employers. In an editorial entitled 'Information Please, Mr. Curtin', the *Daily Telegraph* argued that 'With the resignation of Damien Parer, recognised as one of the

[789] Parer letter to Anderson, 28 May 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.
[790] *Ibid*.
[791] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 279.
[792] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 3 Jun 1943, 4.
[793] *Ibid*.
[794] Hasluck, *The Government and the People: 1939-1941*, 203.

best newsreel photographers in the world, it becomes obvious that something is drastically wrong in the Department of Information'.[795] It continued:

> Silk just wanted to do a job—to distribute his pictures to the great American audience on whom we depend for sympathy and aid. One would imagine that the Department would try to help. But the dead hand of bureaucracy lies upon it … Forms, rituals, and official poppycock must be preserved. The public would like the Prime Minister himself to clear up the issue.[796]

The *Sun News-Pictorial* echoed a similar sentiment a day later, calling for an 'inquiry into the circumstances which have caused three of Australia's leading war photographers to resign … the value to Australia of the work of war photographers of international repute, like Parer and George Silk, is too great for their resignations to be lightly regarded'.[797] Through this orchestrated press campaign, Parer and his supporters sought to use their status to exert pressure on the Department to relent to their demands. This pressure caused concern within the Department: 'I have decided that it might be a good idea', Bob Hawes wrote to Senator Ashley, 'if "The Sun" and "Telegraph" were still continuing the Silk-Anderson business, to have a hit back on Saturday … they have swallowed the yarns they have been told'.[798] The Department, now on the back foot, sought to regain the upper hand in the dispute by releasing a series of press releases justifying their treatment of their war correspondents and criticising the intervention of Alphonse. In one press release issued in early June, Senator Ashley stated that Alphonse's comments to the press were 'utterly irresponsible, as will be seen by the fact that the only reasons given by Parer in his letter … were financial reasons, and yet … Mr. A. Parer states that his brother was not interested in the financial aspect, but was resigning because of inefficiency within the Department, and inadequate equipment'.[799]

Clearly, the two sides had reached an impasse: the power of bureaucracy had been faced down by the power of popular appeal. Once the story had become public in such a coordinated way, there was little chance of rapprochement. In the end, the reach of the newspapers had proven a valuable tool for Parer: 'I think we've won', he wrote to Anderson on 8 June, 'The press are putting the acid on Hawes'.[800] Indeed, Silk later credited his 'escape' from the DOI's employment to the press campaign, stating that 'I had all the newspapers on my side'.[801] The pressure exerted by the press on the Department, coupled with the fact that Silk had been right when he noted that his status as a New Zealand national left him exempt from the Australian Manpower Act, rendered it essentially toothless in its aim to disrupt Silk's plans for an extended period of time.[802] The Department and the ADPR, therefore, had little choice but to accept that Silk would be moving to *Life* regardless of any further attempts to hamper the process, and his re-accreditation was announced on 20 June—

[795] *Ibid*.
[796] *Ibid*.
[797] *Sun News-Pictorial*, 4 Jun 1943.
[798] Bob Hawes letter to Senator W. P. Ashley, 2 Jun 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[799] Senator W. P. Ashley press release, 3 Jun 1943, SP109/16, NAA (Sydney).
[800] Parer letter to Anderson, 8 Jun 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.
[801] Silk interviewed by McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[802] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 281.

less than a month after the press campaign had been launched. Anderson, meanwhile, was eventually reinstated by the Department after a period spent as a stretcher-bearer in New Guinea, his reputation intact.

The success of the campaign, however, must have been a double-edged sword for Parer. He had been able to expose the flaws of the Department to the public, further establish the popular reputation that he enjoyed as a national celebrity, and resolve the situations that his friends found themselves in—but this surely came at a cost. Having dug their heels in on the issue of money—a key concern for Parer—the Department would not meet his demands. Despite urgent requests from Ken Hall to attempt to negotiate with the Department, Parer would not relent on the matter of expenses. This meant that he would serve out his notice until its expiration on 24 August, during which time he filmed *Assault on Salamaua*.[803] Much of the press campaign had been aimed at depicting Parer, Silk and Anderson as honest reporters who sought nothing more than to capture the heroism of Australian troops for both the domestic and international audience. They were being prevented from doing this, it was claimed, by the bureaucracy and ineptitude of the Department of Information. And yet regardless of all this, Parer was still able to film what was perhaps his most accomplished newsreel while serving out his notice. He and his supporters had been at great pains to stress that his resignation was not primarily motivated by his frustration with the rate of pay and expenses that he received, but since then Silk had been released and Anderson's prospects were looking better. Despite this he was still intent on resigning and would not even consider the possibility of negotiations with the Department. When he left the DOI in August to join Paramount News USA, who offered a significantly heftier pay package, the press lauded his contributions to Australian national life, but seemed to gloss over the fact that it had been solely Parer's decision to end his commitment to filming Australians due to dissatisfaction over his salary. In an opinion piece, the *Daily Telegraph* asked why Parer had been lost to the Americans, reaching the conclusion that 'the Department of Information doesn't think he's worth a few quid a week living expenses'.[804] His films, they argued, 'not only thrilled Australia; they thrilled America and showed the people of that country what Australians were really doing in this war … Now he is going to work for Paramount … and Australia will lose one of the best publicity men it ever had'.[805]

Clearly the press campaign had paid off: by using an established network of contacts, Parer was able to instigate a narrative within the press which depicted himself and his friends as faithful servants of Australia, informing and inspiring those at home and bolstering the country's reputation abroad. The question of money, therefore, was always a matter of secondary importance in the press. The Department, with its mass of bureaucracy and petty squabbles, was held responsible for obstructing Parer in his desire to film Australians. But why, after Silk was finally allowed to join *Life* and with Ken Hall continuing to plead with him to remain with the Department, did Parer hold firm in his decision to stop filming his beloved Australians troops in favour of Americans? Judging by the press coverage alone, it is

[803] *Herald* (Melbourne), 19 Aug 1943.
[804] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 3 Oct 1943.
[805] *Ibid*.

unthinkable that Parer would not want to go on filming Australians, regardless of the personal cost.

The answer has to be twofold. Firstly, Parer's relationships within the Department had well and truly broken down following the press campaign. 'The press', Parer wrote gleefully to Anderson on 8 June, 'are putting the acid on Hawes'.[806] He considered himself to be the Department's most valuable asset, while those bureaucrats who remained faceless in their offices were to be held in contempt:

> I'm satisfied now they're all tarred with the same brush in that office. Bullshitting Barney is full of blow but no authority, and is yes man to the great stinker. Old Wheezy Bill is a yes man to Bullshitting Barney, and the Angel is also a yes man to the stinker—Taylor's a smarmy old snake.[807]

In pitting himself against those he viewed as apparatchiks, Parer had come to view officialdom with deep disdain. The attack on his closest friends had only deepened this division and set Parer on the road to resignation. His increasing hostility towards the Departmental authorities was interlinked with the second reason for his break with the DOI: his continued dissatisfaction over his salary and expenses. This was usually mentioned in the press, but it was very much subsumed by the narrative which claimed that the Department was actively preventing (or at least significantly obstructing) Parer's ambition to film Australians troops.

The press campaign had, therefore, achieved a number of important objectives for Silk and Parer. The emphasis placed on the service which they had previously provided to Australia not only furthered their own reputations, but also assisted them in their attempt to overcome what they perceived to be injustices. As with White's report from New Guinea and Slessor's resignation in 1944, an attack on one correspondent was considered an attack on their wider community. Parer and Silk recognised that a coordinated and joint effort would be the most effective method to achieve the outcomes they sought. What is also clear is that, aside from the questions concerning the overreach of Departmental authority, the role of personal ambition and ego played a significant part in their departures from Australian employment. Silk viewed the publication of his art as his first priority and thought little of the consequences of this, while Parer no doubt believed that in American employment he would be provided with a healthier salary. While the language of their departures may have been couched in some legitimate concerns about the nature of their employment, therefore, the fulfilment of their own ambitions in relation to their work and lifestyle was certainly a significant element governing the course of action taken by Parer and Silk.

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[806] Parer letter to Anderson, 8 Jun 1943, Anderson papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 1, SLNSW.
[807] *Ibid*.

As we have seen in this chapter, there were various tools at the disposal of those war correspondents who sought to challenge official authority. The scope of official authority had certainly increased by the time the war reached New Guinea in early 1942, resulting in various courses of action taken by the correspondents considered here. Where criticisms and the action taken were measured, as was the case with the report filed by White in May 1942, a desirable outcome was achieved. There was, however, no wholescale change in the system of rules placed on war correspondents. When there was a refusal to accept the status quo or the decisions of senior military personnel, as was the case with the departures of Slessor, Wilmot, Silk and Parer from their employment as Australian correspondents, a struggle ensued which resulted in bitter clashes. In the cases of Slessor, Silk and Parer, these clashes were played out in the papers, which became a tool that could be mobilised to their advantage to produce public sympathy for their plight and publicise the difficulties they were faced with. There was a friction built into their roles as war correspondents: their employers and the military demanded that they act in a certain way, yet always abiding by these expectations would, the correspondents believed, hamper the successful pursuit of the work they wanted to produce.

What is clear is that war correspondents sought to improve conditions for themselves in their efforts to report truthfully by invoking their collective difficulties faced in the field. Overzealous censorship and the overreach of official rules and regulations left many of them frustrated by the hampering of their work by bureaucrats and military officials. By emphasising the concerns of the wider group, they believed that their own struggles would be leant a greater air of legitimacy and a desirable outcome reached. In doing this, they could, as was the case with Slessor, Silk and Parer, become the centre of the story itself rather than simply those who reported the news. As such, those who actively challenged official authority to a significant extent became much more than simply journalists, whose main duty was to witness and report on events. They became active participants in the life of the battlefield and in military affairs. Not, of course, by picking up weapons, but by using the primary recourse available to them: their words and their authority as major names in the field.

Chapter Eight

The Anzac Legend

One of the most defining cultural myths in Australia is the Anzac legend. As Jeffrey Grey has written, 'War and military service have been among the great defining influences in our history … A majority of Australians still define an important part of the national ethos and national identity in terms of the Australian experience of war'.[808] The central event on which this was constructed was the failed Gallipoli campaign of 1915, with the landing at Anzac Cove on 25 April being the focal point of Anzac mythmaking. Gallipoli has provided Australia with a foundation myth of national identity formation—what Carolyn Holbrook has called 'the fundamental conceit of the martial baptism'—which claims that, through a bloody yet supposedly 'glorious' defeat, certain characteristics were established in the Australian mindset and national consciousness.[809] Such is the power of the word 'Anzac', and the qualities associated with it, that the historian Ken Inglis was driven to ask 'Has an acronym ever lived such a life?'.[810]

These qualities include such things as a spirit of mateship, larrikinism, egalitarianism, and heroic strength and perseverance in the face of extreme hardship.[811] These still resonate today, with Gallipoli 'pilgrimages' being a popular undertaking for those wishing to indulge in what Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward have called 'sentimental nationalism'.[812] This form of nationalism as constituted by the Anzac legend teaches Australians 'to valorise war and military endeavour above all other forms of human activity'.[813] As such, there has arisen in Australia a kind of Anzac cult, defined by Ken Inglis as a 'civil religion' that attaches great spiritual and cultural importance to the 'ideal of manhood or womanhood'.[814] This ideal is embodied by the characteristics associated with Anzac and has been enshrined in the physical landscape by buildings like the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which is simultaneously part commemorative shrine, part museum, part warehouse for war relics and part research centre for both scholarly and family historians alike. Originally conceived as a national memorial and museum for the First World War, by the time of its formal opening in November 1941 another conflict had necessitated the expansion of its vision and it has

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[808] Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.
[809] Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014), 215.
[810] K. S. Inglis, "Anzac and the Australian Military Tradition" in *Anzac Remembered: Selected Writings of K. S. Inglis*, ed. John Lack (Melbourne: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 1998), 125.
[811] See, for example, Graham Seal, *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2004); L. L. Robson, "The Australian Soldier: Formation of a Stereotype" in *Australia: Two Centuries of War & Peace*, eds. Michael McKernan and Margaret Browne (Canberra: AWM in association with Allen & Unwin, 1988), 313-337.
[812] Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, "'It Was Really Moving, Mate': The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia", *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2007): 141-151.
[813] *Ibid.*, 151.
[814] K. S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 458.

continued to document the Australian experience of all wars that the country has been involved in.[815]

This expansion of the Australian War Memorial's vision to include the experience of the Second World War is demonstrative of a process by which knowledge, documentation and depiction of war is updated with the coming of a new conflict. From an Anzac perspective, the outbreak of the Second World War provided an opportunity not only to commemorate another major war that Australia was involved in, but also the possibility of adding to and updating the legend. Just as in the First World War, the designs for this Anzac mythmaking were provided largely through the work of the country's war correspondents, who now had the use of modern mediums like still and motion photography and radio broadcasting, alongside traditional print journalism, to bolster the Anzac mystique. They would build to a great extent on the work of the Memorial's founder, Charles Bean, who as the first Australian Official War Correspondent (and later Official Historian), had significantly contributed to the birth of the legend. John F. Williams has depicted Bean as one of the First World War's 'most formidable propagandists', arguing that it was the popular press which helped to establish and popularise the Anzac legend.[816] Fay Anderson echoes Williams' argument, writing that 'The Anzac soldier perpetuated by the press became the archetypal hero and embodiment of heroic racial characteristics such as a physical courage, moral virtue and mateship'.[817] She notes that 'The Anzac legend was as crucial to the generations of Australian journalists who followed Bean and his cohort … The Anzac ideal was never repudiated and an acute sense of the heroic tradition continued in the coverage of Tobruk, Kokoda and the other Australian campaigns in World War II'.[818]

Bean was the key individual in the original dissemination of the Anzac legend, building on the celebratory Gallipoli writing of the British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett.[819] His despatches routinely celebrated the troops' 'sheer self-sacrifice and heroic courage', embodying a nationalistic discourse which he continued in his writings elsewhere, including the Official History.[820] During his compilation of the *Anzac Book* in 1915, for example, which contained numerous pieces of writing and artwork supposedly sole-authored by Australian soldiers at Gallipoli, Bean 'rigorously excluded material which was different from his vision of an "Anzac" … the material Bean chose, or wrote himself, stressed characteristics like humour [and] coolness under fire'.[821] Though he was critical of some of the soldiers' more unsavoury behaviour away from the front, Bean's hand was all over the early development and dissemination of the Anzac legend—he became, in effect, 'The

[815] See Jennifer Wellington, *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 265-280.
[816] John F. Williams, *Anzacs, the Media, and the Great War* (Sydney: UNSW, 1999), 265.
[817] Anderson, "Good Campers: The History of Australian War Reporting", 1173.
[818] *Ibid.*, 1173-1174; see also Robin Gerster, *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987).
[819] Kevin Fewster, "Ellis Ashmead Bartlett and the Making of the Anzac Legend", *Journal of Australian Studies* 6, no. 10 (1982): 17-30.
[820] *Leader* (NSW), 27 Aug 1915, 6.
[821] E. M. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian Relations during World War I* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 61.

champion of the ideal Anzac', placing this ideal at the forefront of the Australian imagination of their countrymen's wartime exploits.[822]

By the outbreak of the Second World War, Bean claimed, the Anzac tradition was 'now the main national tradition of Australia'.[823] It is hard to dispute Bean's assertion. Anzac became in the interwar period what historian Craig Stockings has called 'an inescapable social force tied to the core of national identity, and its powerful symbolism and mythology permeated all aspects of life'.[824] After an initial dip in interest, by the late 1920s Anzac Day was 'institutionalised as a popular patriotic pageant', largely as a result of efforts by the Returned and Services League of Australia to commemorate the 'diggers' day'.[825] In a note to the states in 1923, the Commonwealth spoke of the need to instil 'into the minds of the children of Australia the significance of Anzac Day', while the federal president of the RSL stated in 1926 that 'The name ANZAC is sacred and imperishable'.[826] Anzac Day had by 1925 been declared a national holiday, with attendances at ceremonies and marches growing year on year in the interwar period—500,000 spectators witnessed the Anzac Day march in Sydney in 1938.[827] The connotations of the word 'Anzac' meant that it was used regularly for road and place names and restricted to authorised usage, while at one time the idea that the Tasman Sea might be renamed the Anzac Sea had even been suggested.[828] Off the back of the legend built by those like Bean, therefore, Australian society had been flooded with symbols and information extolling the virtues of Anzac.

Bean's Anzac ideal was largely sustained and embellished by the war correspondents considered here. For some, there was a conscious effort to continue his work. In a lecture delivered to Australian troops aboard the *Franconia* as it sailed from England to the Middle East in January and February 1941, for example, Kenneth Slessor spoke of the importance of Bean's work in developing a sense of national identity. 'Our country', he said, 'is only just beginning to feel conscious of itself as a nation' and the work of Bean as Official War Correspondent and Historian had helped to foster this national spirit.[829] When he was appointed a war correspondent by the ABC in September 1940, meanwhile, it was Bean that Chester Wilmot sought out for advice.[830] This chapter will analyse how these war correspondents built on this work, whether consciously or unconsciously, effectively embellishing the Anzac legend while still celebrating its enduring connection to the First World War.

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[822] Marilyn Lake, "Introduction: What have you done for your country?", in *What's Wrong with Anzac?: The Militarisation of Australian History*, eds. Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds, Joy Damousi and Mark McKenna (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 18-19.
[823] C.E.W. Bean, *The Old A.I.F and the New* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940), 24.
[824] Craig Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009), 289.
[825] Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013), 150.
[826] Both cited in Inglis, "Anzac and the Australian Military Tradition", 128-129.
[827] Carl Bridge, "Anzac Day" in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, 32-37.
[828] Inglis, "Anzac and the Australian Military Tradition", 128.
[829] Slessor lecture, 'The Work of an Official War Correspondent', cited in Semmler (ed.), *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, 578.
[830] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 85.

In doing so, some of them were able to weave *themselves* into the Anzac tapestry, becoming simultaneously both mythmaker and mythic hero. This depiction of the war correspondent as 'hero, propagandist and myth-maker' was first seriously considered by Phillip Knightley, who caricatured 'the intrepid war correspondent' as a figure who, through his mythmaking endeavours, becomes 'the hero of his own story'.[831] This is particularly true in the case of Damien Parer, whose daring exploits on the battlefield to capture images of the Australian troops quickly became the stuff of legend. Parer was the archetypal 'heroic' war correspondent whose death in the pursuit of his job sealed his legend. As David Welch has argued, the 'popular image of the war correspondent in the public imagination is of a gallant, heroic figure bringing us impartial reports from conflict zones around the world. The fact that these journalists cover war itself gives them a romantic edge over other correspondents'.[832] The Anzac legend is, after all, a highly romanticised view of the Australian fighting man and national identity. It makes sense, therefore, that the romanticised war correspondent, who has helped to craft and embellish the myth, would find a place for themself within the legend's narrative as a brave 'noble warrior of truth risking his (or her) life in unpleasant war zones'.[833] As such, we have to take into consideration what Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath have described as the process by which 'exposure from covering war propels a select few to celebrity status'.[834]

The Anzac legend, then, is a major theme when analysing the work of the war correspondents considered here. All, to varying extents, had to engage with it in some capacity, with their work contributing to the embellishment of the legend and helping to shape the narrative of the war. In this way, there was a continuation of the work done by Bean and others in the First World War, who had effectively laid the blueprint for how the Australian troops should be reported on. Of course, some correspondents were far more concerned with consciously contributing to the Anzac mystique than others. All, however, operated within an environment in which, as the previous chapter outlined, they were expected to report on events in a way deemed suitable by military and governmental authorities. These authorities, as will be explained, have long had an agenda in promoting the Anzac ideal. As Joy Damousi has written, 'The story of Anzac joins individual sentiment to powerful narratives about nation and war promoted by government agencies and political leaders'.[835] The symbolic power of Anzac, therefore, is worth considering in this context.

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[831] Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 44.
[832] David Welch, "Introduction: 'Winning Hearts and Minds': The Changing Context of Reportage and Propaganda, 1900-2003", in *War and the Media: Reportage and Propaganda, 1900-2003*, eds. Mark Connelly and David Welch (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), xiv.
[833] *Ibid.*, xiv.
[834] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 10.
[835] Joy Damousi, "Why do we get so emotional about Anzac?", in *What's Wrong with Anzac?*, eds. Lake et al, 98-99.

An Anzac Inheritance: Renewing and Updating the Legend

When Australia entered the Second World War, it was natural that connections and distinctions would be drawn between the coming of this war and the dawn of the last. The birth of the Second AIF in September 1939, it seemed to many in Australia, was not the coming of something entirely new, but rather a return to a heroic tradition of soldiering—the Anzacs, it seemed, were back and ready once more to travel to distant shores in the defence of Australia and others. They were even headed for the same destination as their predecessors of the First AIF, providing a convenient way for the press to depict them as the inheritors of an Anzac tradition.[836] In a nod to their predecessors, as Ken Inglis has written, the first division raised for the new incarnation of the AIF 'was numbered the 6th, taking up the count from the five of 1918'.[837]

Particularly in the first few years of the war, the comparisons between the two AIFs were made overtly. By 'Anzac inheritance', I do not mean only in the sense that the Second AIF seemed to be (or was depicted as) the group to whom the Anzac baton had been passed, but also in the sense that war correspondents had already been provided an Anzac blueprint to work with by their own predecessors—the likes of Charles Bean and Keith Murdoch. Particularly Kenneth Slessor, in his role as the Official War Correspondent (and, therefore, Bean's successor), would engage with the subject extensively, but Anzac as a concept was impossible for any Australian war correspondent to ignore given the weight of its significance following the First World War.

The popular image of the Australian fighting man from the First World War loomed large in the portrayal of the new Anzac generation. This is most evident in the 1943 documentary film *Sons of the Anzacs*, which was a collaborative endeavour primarily between Chester Wilmot and Damien Parer. The film was also co-produced by Arthur Higgins who, as mentioned in chapter five, was a significant mentor for Parer during his early years in the film industry. An initiative of the Australian War Memorial's Acting Managing Director, Arthur Bazley, the film was a sequel to the 1939 film *We of the AIF*, which compiled footage of the 'diggers' of the First World War.[838] Wilmot provided the lion's share of the script and narrated much of the film, while Parer provided the majority of the footage and narrated, in his typically breathless manner, a section of the film regarding the fighting around Salamaua in New Guinea. For Bazley, Wilmot was the obvious choice to head the project, writing later that 'Having been with the AIF as the [Australian Broadcasting] Commission's representative from the beginning he seemed best fitted to the task'.[839] Charting the campaigns that the divisions of the Second AIF had fought up until that time, *Sons of the Anzacs* is simultaneously an audio-visual celebration and commemoration of the Australian military (particularly, of course, the infantry), with Parer's footage providing the visual 'evidence' for

[836] Lakin, *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection*, 101-102.
[837] Inglis, "Anzac and the Australian Military Tradition", 136.
[838] McDonald, *Valiant for Truth*, 303.
[839] Cited in *Ibid.*, 303.

Wilmot's stirring words. The film's title reflected the popularly held belief that, in the words of Bean, the First and Second AIF 'are as like as father and son—which to a considerable extent is their actual relationship'.[840]

Figure 20: Still from opening credits of "Sons of the Anzacs" (1943) (AWM)

In the opening scene, Wilmot's words are superimposed over an image of the Australian War Memorial, declaring that during the First World War:

> Australia gained an honoured place among the nations through the service and sacrifice of men such as these. Their spirit, the spirit of Anzac, lived on to inspire her people long after rifle and bayonet had been laid aside … Twenty years later when the challenge came again, that same spirit fired the Sons of Anzac, and they went out to meet it on land, at sea, and in the air.[841]

Immediately a connection is drawn by Wilmot between the men of the First AIF and those of the Second, who are depicted as their 'successors' and the inheritors of the Anzac spirit. Of course, as Ken Inglis has stated, these men had to be depicted as 'inheritors, bearers of standard or torch, upholders' because the defining events of the Anzac myth (Gallipoli) had already taken place and meaning ascribed to it—'You can't be baptised, or come of age, or become a nation, twice'.[842]

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[840] Bean, *The Old A.I.F. and the New*, 3. This despite the fact that Bean himself wrote that only 'ten per cent of the new men [of the Second AIF] are the sons of soldiers'; Bean, *The Old A.I.F. and the New*, 24.
[841] *Sons of the Anzacs* (1943), accession number: F00188, AWM.
[842] Inglis, "Anzac and the Australian Military Tradition", 136.

This idea of an Anzac inheritance is drilled into the audience throughout the film. When discussing the outbreak of the war, for instance, Wilmot declares that Australia had 'few military assets beyond the tradition and experience of the First AIF. To the Second AIF in October 1939 came the raw material of an army: old diggers who had forgotten much, youngsters who knew nothing of war. Overnight they all became soldiers in garb at least, and with the dawn a new army rises'. Sailing for the Middle East in 1940, meanwhile, he notes that 'The men realise for the first time that they're part of a great common enterprise. As they sail the route the First AIF had taken, they feel the hand of its tradition on their shoulders'. On their arrival in Gaza, he informs the audience that this was a place 'which the First AIF helped to make famous'.[843] While Wilmot effectively explains some of the battlefield tactics concerning events like the Battle of Bardia in early January 1941, the entirety of the film until it reaches the outbreak of war in the Pacific is largely occupied with this Anzac theme. This is particularly evident when General Blamey's speech to the 9th Division in Palestine after the siege of Tobruk is shown, with Blamey declaring that:

> I'm reminded that just twenty-six years ago, your fathers had a very similar experience to yours in Tobruk. They landed in Gallipoli at the end of April, and they remained there for the remainder of the year … you have, strangely enough, repeated the history of the Anzacs at Gallipoli. What is more, you have carried out with vigour and with courage and good energy the task of maintaining superiority over the enemy.[844]

Sons of the Anzacs, therefore, makes explicit a key way in which those like Wilmot and Parer sought to renew and continue the Anzac legend. By portraying the Second AIF as the spiritual and literal heirs to the First, they sought to emphasise that the Anzac legend and the meanings attached to it were still very much alive, stirred into action once more by a new conflict. After the film was first screened at Sydney Town Hall in November 1943, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that it was 'worthy of the place for which undoubtedly it was intended in the archives of the nation', noting that it would be screened four times daily at the same venue until 10 December and then throughout Australia.[845] Audiences paid to attend the showings, with proceeds going towards various relevant charitable endeavours such as the RSL's Distress Fund and the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour.[846] The War Memorial was delighted with the film's success, with Bazley writing to Parer in June 1944 that 'attendances have been very gratifying. At Wagga, for example, 1,174 people attended on the one night it was shown there—a record for the theatre!'.[847] The *Argus*, meanwhile, praised the effect that camera and film technology had in documenting this modern Anzac epic, writing that 'time … has granted to the second generation of Anzacs a record of their great achievements that was denied their fathers on Gallipoli and in France and Palestine. The science of the motion picture camera, in its infancy during the first Great War, has preserved a visual story of the great events in which the second AIF participated'.[848]

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[843] *Sons of the Anzacs*, F00188, AWM.
[844] *Ibid*.
[845] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 Nov 1943, 11.
[846] *Truth* (Sydney), 7 Nov 1943, 24.
[847] A. W. Bazley letter to Parer, 19 Jun 1944, Damien Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/4, SLNSW.
[848] *Argus*, 26 Jul 1944, 4.

Through the press, therefore, a new layer was being added to the Anzac legend which depicted the Second AIF as both imitating and bolstering the heroic record of the First.

This was something that Slessor sought to achieve through his despatches. As the inheritor of Bean's role, and indeed having been handpicked by Bean and a small circle of others, Slessor was expected to use his literary talents to 'tell the story' of the Australian troops. As Henry Gullett wrote to Claude McKay at *Smith's Weekly* after Slessor's appointment, it was hoped that through his reportage he would be able to 'leave an enduring mark on Australian literature'.[849] This literary coverage of the troops would be told from an Anzac-minded perspective, just as Bean had done in the First World War. Slessor recognised the weight of these expectations, noting that 'I have the enormous assistance of the work that has been so finely done before me by Sir Henry Gullett and Dr. Bean, both of whom have given me their kind and generous help'.[850] It was not merely the weight of expectation that would drive Slessor to progress the Anzac legend through his writing, however. As noted in chapter three, he had a genuine interest in and connection to the idea that the Australian fighting man represented a heroic ideal. His first published poems in *The Bulletin* concerned Anzac themes, while Ian Fitchett, the acting Official War Correspondent prior to Slessor's appointment, suggested that he had a 'poet's view of the Anzac tradition'.[851]

This is evident from Slessor's work with *Smith's Weekly*, which branded itself the 'Digger's paper' and published a weekly column of soldier stories entitled the 'Unofficial History of the AIF'. In an article written upon his appointment in April 1940, Slessor used *Smith's* as a way to link the two generations of the AIF and to emphasise his own and his paper's continuing connection to the Australian fighting man. 'Ever since I can remember', he wrote, '*Smith's* has been the Digger's paper … no less the Diggers of the other war than of the Diggers, second generation, who are treading, where their fathers trod, in Palestine today … the second generation A.I.F. of which I hope to write, is the same A.I.F. whose battles were fought by *Smith's* 20 years ago'.[852] The second generation of the AIF, as Slessor depicted it, had a genuine heritage that it could look to but was also virtually indistinguishable from the original Anzacs in terms of spirit and character. This depiction was eased further by the fact that, at this early stage of the war, the AIF was travelling to the same locations as it had done in the first war. History, so it seemed to those like Slessor, was repeating itself.

This provided a convenient way for Slessor to live up to the literary expectations of his role. In his first despatch he wrote about a parade of soldiers through Sydney's Martin Place prior to their embarkation. 'They came through Martin Place swiftly and obstinately, like the rising of an Australian river', he wrote, 'Light caught them and drenched them, burning on the long arithmetic of fixed bayonets and moving arms. Beside each man walked his shadow, and the

[849] Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor*, 179.
[850] *Smith's Weekly*, 20 Apr 1940, 4.
[851] Cited in Semmler (ed.), *The War Diaries of Kenneth Slessor*, xxvi.
[852] *Smith's Weekly*, 6 Apr 1940, 3.

shadow of his bayonet'.[853] As well as the obvious allusion to the 'sun drenched' Anzac trope, used extensively in the First World War, the shadow of the men here seems to represent the ghost of the First AIF, marching alongside this new incarnation of the Anzac myth. 'Now they had reached the Cenotaph', Slessor continued with a further nod to their predecessors, 'eyes swept to the right, fixed on infinity … the men marched on. They were marching into history … now they were indistinguishably one man, and he was a tall, straight, loose-limbed soldier, with a grin full of teeth, and he was Australia'.[854] These soldiers, he believed, represented the ideal of the Australian 'digger', embodying characteristics like mateship.

This linking of the Second AIF to the First was not too dissimilar to the way in which Australian soldiers of the First World War had been compared to the colonial pioneers and bushmen. Writing in 1917 for the commemorative volume *Anzac Memorial*, for example, Herbert Nicholls wrote that 'Our Anzacs in Gallipoli and France are worthy sons of the pioneers. Their very don't-care-a-damness is typical of the old Colonial days'.[855] The artist Will Dyson, meanwhile, as Graham Seal has shown, gave this a 'visual representation', with one of his drawings of a dead Australian soldier on the Western Front being entitled 'The Wild Colonial Boy' after a famous bush ballad.[856] Dyson's caption for the drawing was borrowed from the ballad: 'The Wild Colonial Boy: Sooner than dwell in slavery bowed down by iron chains'.[857] Bean himself had drawn attention to the connection between the Anzacs of the First World War and the 'noble bushman', reporting after his arrival in Gallipoli, for example, that the 'wild pastoral life in Australia, if it makes rather wild men, makes superb soldiers'.[858] In reality, as historian Carl Bridge has written, 'the vast majority of the Anzacs came from the cities' rather than the heavily Romanticised Australian bush.[859]

The birth of the Second AIF, therefore, seemed to be an opportunity to continue the 'dynasty', adding a further chapter to this Anzac lineage which originally stemmed from the bush. Slessor was, as explained in previous chapters, deeply influenced by Bean and sought to build on his work. Alongside his efforts to help shape this new chapter in the history of the AIF's depiction, Slessor also drew upon similar pastoral images as Bean. The men marching through Martin Place, for example, came from 'the Australia of mills and engine-rooms and factories … the Australia of sprawling station-empires, and the Australia of little lonely heroic farms'.[860] Slessor and his fellow war correspondents were, therefore, provided with a blueprint for writing about Anzac by Bean and other correspondents of the First World War. Just as their war correspondent predecessors had linked the original Anzacs with the pioneers of the bush, Slessor and his peers could link the Second AIF with both the First generation of 'diggers' and the pioneers.

[853] *Smith's Weekly*, 6 Apr 1940, 2.
[854] *Ibid.*, 2.
[855] Cited in Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, 17.
[856] *Ibid.*, 17-18.
[857] Will Dyson, 'The Wild Colonial Boy', accession number: ART02305, AWM.
[858] E. M. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, 62.
[859] Carl Bridge, "Australia's Gallipoli, 1915: Myths and Realities", *Historian* 125 (2015): 35.
[860] *Smith's Weekly*, 6 Apr 1940, 2.

As well as through the press, this could also be done with the assistance of modern technology by the time of the Second World War. Parer drew direct inspiration from the work of those like Bean and Dyson for his photographic and cinematographic work. His photograph of Captain Edward Hedberg in front of the Sphinx in Giza, captured in May 1940, 'precisely replicated' Bean's own photograph of the Sphinx taken in 1916, emphasising the fact that this new generation of the AIF was following in the footsteps of the old.[861] It also recalled images of the 'diggers' of the First AIF on the steps of the pyramids in 1915.[862] Through capturing photographs like these, Parer made it clear not only that he sought to add further texture to the Anzac legend by drawing upon the history of the First AIF, but also that he had inherited an approach to his work from his predecessors. As Kevin Foster has written, Parer's photograph was 'a self-conscious nod to the great chronicler of the nation's First World War experience and an acknowledgement … of the traditions within which *he* was working and the standards against which he knew *his* work would be measured'.[863]

Parer was also determined to update the work of his predecessors, using his modern equipment to develop the themes initially laid out by those like Bean. As he stated to a friend, to whom he gifted a copy of Dyson's *Australia at War*, he had a 'desire to achieve with his camera what Dyson did with his pen'.[864] Parer's most famous shot (discussed in the next section of this chapter), that of the temporarily blinded 'digger' being escorted across a creek by his 'mate' in New Guinea (featured in the film *Assault on Salamaua*), has been shown by Neil McDonald to have close similarities to Dyson's 1918 drawing *Wine of Victory*.[865] Though the scenes bear a very close similarity in composition, Dyson's drawing of wounded German prisoners on the Western Front evokes feelings of 'the futility of war', while Parer's image celebrates the heroic perseverance of the 'digger' in the face of hardship.[866] It is an example, therefore, of how the work and ideas of those like Dyson could be used and adapted for their own purposes by those like Parer in the Second World War.

The connections drawn between the First and Second AIF were, of course, particularly prominent while the war remained in Europe and the Middle East as the 'diggers' retraced the steps of their forefathers. The failed Greek campaign of April 1941, however, offered the first real opportunity to add something genuinely new to the Anzac myth while still maintaining the link to the original Anzacs. As the birthplace of Classical mythology, Greece presented Australian war correspondents with an ideal setting for the chronicling of Anzac heroics. Located on the other side of the Aegean Sea to Gallipoli and also ending in failure, the

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[861] Lakin, *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection*, 102.
[862] See 'Group portrait of all the original officers and men of the 11th Battalion, 3rd Brigade, AIF', 10 Jan 1915, accession number: P05717.001, AWM.
[863] Kevin Foster, "Regimes of Truth: Australian Combat Photography in the Second World War", *Journal of Australian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2016): 256.
[864] Shirley Hines letter to Neil McDonald, 17 Jul 2006, Neil McDonald papers, MLMSS 7838, folder 4, SLNSW.
[865] Neil McDonald, "The Making of Cinesound's *Assault on Salamaua*" in *History on/and/in Film*, eds. Tom O'Regan and Brian Shoesmith, (Perth: History and Film Association of Australia, 1987), 101-105.
[866] *Ibid.*, 101-105.

circumstances of the campaign offered fertile ground for Anzac mythmaking. The Australian soldiers, Slessor wrote in a despatch from Greece, 'find themselves in a country that might be a piece of Australia towed across the world … There is a perceptible affinity, too, between those Argonauts of the southern world and the descendants of an age-old race whose monuments overshadow them'.[867] The presence of the larrikin 'digger' in the shadow of Classical Antiquity seemed to represent a kind of triumph for the young Australian nation—here were men of the 'new' world seemingly coming to the rescue of one of the world's oldest democracies. As such, as Slessor does in the previous quotation, the Australians could be likened to modern day Homeric heroes whose feats were beginning to surpass even those of their AIF forefathers. 'Their arrival in Greek towns', Slessor wrote in the same despatch, 'has been in the nature of a triumphal procession. They are the first Australian soldiers ever to march through Greece—the nearest the Diggers in the last war ever got was the hospital base at Lemnos'.[868]

This likening of the men to modern day Homeric heroes was an idea which appealed to George Johnston both during and after the war. Summarising 1941 for the *Argus* at the end of the year, Johnston wrote that the Australian soldiers had begun the year with a 'baptism by fire' in the Middle East.[869] Employing the language of myth, their actions at Tobruk constituted, for Johnston, an 'undying epic' and was 'assured of everlasting memory in the annals of this country'.[870] The Australian actions in Greece allowed Johnston to push this heroic narrative further, invoking the memory of Gallipoli and the legendary sites of Antiquity to mythologise the Australians' presence there. 'On the 26th anniversary of Anzac Day', Johnston wrote:

> Australians were fighting again, this time on the slopes of Mount Olympus, on the plains of Thessaly, in the historic Pass of Thermopylae, fighting an heroic rearguard action against the hordes of Germany, who had swept through Bulgaria and Jugoslavia, and stormed through the ravines that guarded gallant Greece.[871]

Just as those places like Thermopylae and the Thessalian Plain had been etched into Classical legend, so now were places like Greece, Tobruk and Bardia being brought to the forefront of public consciousness and finding their own place as legendary staging posts alongside Gallipoli in the AIF's history. This was reinforced by the multimedia nature of war reporting in the Second World War. Wilmot's broadcast reports triumphantly declared the Battle of Bardia as 'one of the greatest feats in Australian military history' in which 'the men of the Second AIF have shown that they are made of the same fibre as the First AIF', while the siege of Tobruk was 'one of the greatest defensive actions of all time' and demonstrative of a 'firm courage and unbreakable spirit at a moment when the fortunes of war seemed to be turning against us'.[872]

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[867] Slessor despatch, 'Arrival in Greece', 30 Mar 1941, cited in Semmler (ed.), *The War Despatches of Kenneth Slessor*, 140.
[868] *Ibid*, 140.
[869] *Argus*, 31 Dec 1941, 5.
[870] *Ibid*.
[871] *Ibid*.
[872] Wilmot report, 'The Capture of Bardia', 10 Jan 1941, cited in McDonald, *Chester Wilmot Reports*, 42-49; Wilmot report, 'The Holding of Tobruk', Aug 1941, cited in McDonald, *Chester Wilmot Reports*, 211-212.

For the first time too, as discussed in chapter six, the voices of those who had taken part in these feats could be heard on the airwaves thanks to Wilmot's use of the interview—in the first two years of the war alone, Wilmot and Laurence Cecil recorded the voices of between seven and eight thousand personnel.[873] One of Wilmot's Tobruk reports, for example, was listed as being 'Told by Chester Wilmot and Officers and Men of the Garrison'.[874] There was an increasing sense, therefore, that as the list of places associated with Anzac heroics was added to, the actual combatants were made increasingly recognisable and visible to the Australian audience. Not only were they able to hear their voices direct from the battlefield, but there was also a preponderance of photographs and moving images made available for their consumption by those like Parer and George Silk.

Figure 71: "To the Parthenon. Amongst the Pillars", March 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

[873] Lawrence H. Cecil report on activities of ABC Field Unit, 8 Apr 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 29, NLA.
[874] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 218.

Figure 22: "Contrast between the Modern Australian and Ancient Greece", March 1941 (George Silk, AWM)

Returning to Greece as a particularly useful example of this, Silk's photographs of 'diggers' among some of the famous sites of Athens helped to provide the visual 'evidence' for the literary writings of those like Slessor and Johnston. As Maria Hill has noted, these photographs were 'brilliant propaganda pieces. Silhouetted against the ancient ruins of Athens, the Australian soldier with his distinctive slouch hat encompassed all the virtues of the 1st AIF: nobility, courage and mateship'.[875] Moreover, Silk's photographs, particularly those picturing the men wandering the ruins of the Acropolis and gazing up at the ancient columns, located the Australian soldier within the centre of Classical mythology, likening him to a kind of present-day Homeric hero. Yet, as Anna Efstathiadou has written, there have been no works which have 'specifically focused on the rich photographic material taken by' Silk and Parer in Greece.[876]

This Homeric comparison is undoubtedly the impression that was pushed in the press. Johnston, though not even present in Greece at the time, clearly saw in events there the potential for mythmaking. Writing in the *Argus*, he used Blamey's presence at both Gallipoli and the Greek campaign to link the First and Second AIF. In a piece entitled 'Blamey, Master Organiser: Destiny of Anzacs', Johnston wrote that 'It is April, 1941. And along a coastline washed by the blue Aegean, Australians and New Zealanders are evacuating a battlefield—

[875] Maria Hill, *Diggers and Greeks: The Australian Campaign in Greece and Crete* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 131.
[876] Efstathiadou, "Australian Official War Photography from the Campaign in Greece, 1941", 91.

the battlefield of Greece. Exactly 25 years ago, to the month, the fathers of these fighters from two Dominions were storming another shell-blasted Aegean shore, in April, 1915'.[877]

This was not a mere propagandistic exercise by Johnston. After the war he long retained the idea that the exploits of the AIF resembled something from the annals of Greek mythology. Writing for *Walkabout* in 1965, for example, Johnston wrote about the men present at Gallipoli in the First World War in an idolising way, praising the 'extraordinary demeanour and unique spirit of these callous, cynical, carefree young soldiers from half a world away'.[878] Continuing, Johnston wrote that:

> They seemed to belong, not to the standard conceptions of military prowess and disciplines, but to some other, younger, more exuberant world of the spirit. Physical, masculine, their big, sunburnt bodies remarkable to an older world, romping naked under shellfire on the beaches and even fighting naked in their clifftop trenches, activated by simple codes of loyalty, adventure, and comradeship, unmoved by and even sceptical of any thoughts of jingoism or patriotism, admiring and respecting "Johnny Turk", the enemy, far more than they ever admired their own leaders, these Anzacs were to all outside observers a remarkable breed of men. (To the more poetic of these observers they were seen at once, in their combative nakedness and unquenchable spirit, as the reincarnation of the ancient Trojan heroes of mythical times) … [the men] were throw-backs to that earlier time when gods and men had walked the earth together, to the myth-time of the ancient Homeric heroes.[879]

The men of the Second AIF, Johnston believed, possessed 'that same inherent quality in the man that was displayed for the first time and under such fantastic conditions on the cliffs of Anzac'.[880] His job as a war correspondent had allowed him, he believed, to see that:

> as a figure, as a *person* as well as a fighting man, the Australian [soldier] emerged with a remarkable singularity. He was completely different from any other soldier one encountered in the war. There was a kind spirit in him that set him quite apart from anybody else … the more I was with the Australians—and I was a long time with them in New Guinea—the more I began to understand the old *Anzac Book* [of Bean's], and the more I began to sense that there *was* a national legend spawned on the cliffs of distant Gallipoli, and that, as part of this legend or myth, there was a continuing kernel of truth of vital importance to the makeup of the Australian personality and character.[881]

The legend surrounding the Australian soldier was based on what Johnston called 'mythic truth'.[882] This truth about the Anzac legend, he believed, had been perfectly encapsulated in an article by his fellow Australian war correspondent Alan Moorehead entitled 'Return to a

[877] *Argus*, 29 Apr 1941, 4.
[878] George Johnston, "Anzac: A Myth for all Mankind", *Walkabout* 31, no. 4 (1965): 15.
[879] *Ibid.*, 15-16.
[880] *Ibid.*, 16.
[881] *Ibid.*, 13.
[882] *Ibid.*, 13.

Legend'. Published in the *New Yorker* in 1955, the article was an account of Moorehead's visit to Gallipoli and how the experience of walking the battlefield had reignited his emotional attachment to the Anzac legend.[883] Written while Moorehead was living on the Greek island of Spetses and working on his book *Gallipoli* (1956), Johnston had read the article while himself living not far away on Hydra. At the same time, the artist Sidney Nolan was staying with Johnston. Both of them having read Moorehead's article, Johnston described the effect as 'like unlocking a door. From then on, when the retsina circled and wild winter buffeted at the shutters of the waterfront taverns, we would talk far into the small hours about this other myth of our own, so uniquely Australian and yet so close to that much more ancient myth of Homer's'.[884]

From this, Nolan's Gallipoli series of paintings was born, which 'fused Australian and classical images of war'.[885] Inspired by his discussions with Johnston and the experience of proximity to both Gallipoli and the home of Classical mythography, Nolan had become, in Johnston's words:

> immersed in our copies of Homer's Iliad and Robert Graves's Greek Mythology. Yet, nourished by these and living in the very heartland of classical mythology, he still clung to his particular Australianism; he was able somehow to associate the great Trojan epic tragedy with draught paintings he had done, with an Australian background of parched earth, dust, prickly vegetation, death, heat, bones in the dry burning of the sun … In images separated by the width of the world and 3,000 years of time, he sensed a parallel, indeed a mutual poetry concerned with human struggle.[886]

Nolan's Gallipoli paintings, Johnston wrote, 'intended for the Trojan War have largely, and very justifiably, been used for his series of magnificent Gallipoli paintings, which to me depict the poetic imagery of the Anzac myth with more superb truth and a greater sensitivity than we have ever seen before'.[887] This all demonstrates, therefore, Johnston's genuine attachment to and literary way of thinking about the Anzac myth. In a similar way to Slessor, he thought of Anzac in quite poetic terms, seeking to make connections between not only the First and Second AIF, but also the AIF and heroes of Classical mythology. This was an idea which Johnston closely identified with long after the war, further elaborating on the Anzac theme as the years passed, but never drifting far from the viewpoint proffered in his war despatches. As the historian Barry Smith has noted, in Johnston's classic Meredith trilogy of novels, 'the Anzac spirit … is the force which existential man needs to defy the absurd and is as close as Johnston comes to finding any almost divine quality in man'.[888]

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[883] Alan Moorehead, "Return to a Legend", *New Yorker*, 2 Apr 1955, 98-108.
[884] George Johnston, "Gallipoli Paintings", *Art and Australia* 5, no. 2 (1967), 466.
[885] Kinnane, *George Johnston*, 153.
[886] Johnston, "Gallipoli Paintings", 466.
[887] Johnston, "Anzac: A Myth for all Mankind", 14.
[888] Barry Smith, "George Johnston's Anzac: The Role of Sidney Nolan and Peter Finch", *Quadrant* 21, no. 6 (1977): 69.

The Greek campaign certainly made these Classical allusions an easy task for those like Johnston, but it is important to note that the heroic narrative surrounding Anzac continued into the Pacific War. Sites like Greece and Bardia became important milestones in the ever-developing Anzac tapestry—sites where heroic deeds had been performed by Australians which could subsequently be referenced by war correspondents as if referring to fond memories. Writing in the *Argus* in April 1942, for example, Johnston wrote that the Australian action at Rabaul represented a 'new chapter … to the growing story of the heroism of the Australian soldier'.[889] 'This is a story', he wrote, 'which can stand beside the narratives of the Libyan offensive and the Greek campaign as proof that the breed which produced the original Anzacs is holding true, in victory as in defeat, on the scattered battlefields of the second world war'.[890] Johnston's book *New Guinea Diary* (1943) was filled with this kind of dialogue, constantly asserting the superiority of the Australian soldier. The entry for 17 February 1942, for example, recalls the images of the Anzacs at Gallipoli, with Johnston writing of 'sun-bronzed men in khaki hats and khaki shorts, naked to the waist, hewing gunpits and filling sandbags'.[891] Describing a successful attack on a Japanese machinegun post in the entry for Christmas Day 1942, he notes that 'I saw many other incidents just as expressive of the fighting spirit that makes these young Australians the world's best assault troops'.[892] The language of Anzac, it seems, was adaptable for any terrain and any circumstance that the Australians might find themselves in.

Books written by war correspondents like Johnston's *New Guinea Diary* were significant contributions to the canon of Anzac literature. Osmar White's *Green Armour* (1945), too, became a much-celebrated addition to the literature, not only because it highlighted what Australians were doing in the Pacific, but because it brought this to international attention. Though White was never particularly interested in Anzac mythmaking, the book received critical acclaim in the Australian press because it laid out the Australian contribution to the fighting in the Pacific. As the *Daily Telegraph* reported, 'Americans are now inclined to overlook the tremendous, heart-breaking job that the Australian forces are doing rooting out the Japanese from by-passed island jungles. But White's graphic story of the battle against first, the jungle, second, the Jap-trained jungle fighter, should do much to repair this omission from the American daily Press'.[893] The *Argus*, meanwhile, triumphantly reported that *Green Armour* had received a very positive review in the *New York Times*, hailing the possibility that American readers would be reminded that, in the words of the American critic, 'Australians are still fighting the isolated Japanese in those same regions'.[894]

Though these various means of reporting the Anzac legend certainly progressed and updated the myth, the Australian soldier was not always above criticism by war correspondents. While Wilmot regularly celebrated the achievements of the Australians in his broadcasts and brought their voices directly into homes around the country, he was also capable of

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[889] *Argus*, 7 Apr 1942, 2.
[890] *Ibid.*, 2.
[891] George Johnston, *New Guinea Diary*, 17.
[892] *Ibid.*, 257.
[893] *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 24 Feb 1945, 12.
[894] *Argus*, 7 Mar 1945, 16.

recognising the occasional shortcomings of the troops. In two planned broadcasts from January 1942 entitled 'Modern Soldiers are Made not Born', which were subsequently banned from airing by Blamey, Wilmot argued that 'modern soldiers' are 'made by months of hard, thorough, scientific training in modern weapons and tactics', rather than born with an innate ability to fight without adequate training first.[895] Criticising the recruitment process in Australia, he claimed that many of the new recruits were lacking in physical fitness and 'are only fit for B class jobs', while by the time they arrived in the Middle East after a three week voyage 'with little or no exercise, their feet get soft and they are generally flabby'.[896] This was a far cry from the impression conveyed by Slessor through his despatches of similar voyages, noting in July 1940, for example, that upon their arrival in Britain the AIF consisted of 'many fine Australian athletes made even tougher by simple eating, early rising and benevolent austerity of army life'.[897] This reflected, as historian Kevin Blackburn has written, the 'commonly accepted notion that the Anzacs had established a sporting tradition as well as a martial tradition which Australian soldiers of World War II should uphold'.[898]

This example of criticism by Wilmot was, however, certainly not the norm and was prevented from broadcast. This was because it did not fall into line with the military and governmental approved means of reporting on the Australian forces. But what is clear is that, when it came to the Anzac legend, rarely did official bodies have to become directly involved in the question of how the exploits of the Second AIF would be reported. There was a concerted effort by the war correspondents considered here to craft a literary and artistic presentation of the Australian soldier which directly linked him with the original Anzacs. In this way, the reportage conveyed a strong sense that there had been an Anzac inheritance, and this provided a key way in which the legend was renewed and updated. Further to this, the work of these correspondents quite consciously drew upon the tradition established by the correspondents of the First World War, particularly Charles Bean, adopting familiar phrases and imagery to progress their conception of the Anzac legend in the modern setting of war. These settings included, in part, locations that were familiar to Australian audiences from the First World War. But in addition to these locations, new places were added to the litany of seemingly heroic chapters in the history of the AIF. Bardia, Greece and New Guinea started to be discussed in the same breath as Gallipoli, adding to the sense that a tradition of exemplary soldiering had been established by the fathers of those now following in their footsteps.

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[895] Wilmot, 'Modern Soldiers are Made not Born, No. 1', 31 Jan 1942, Wilmot papers, MS 8436, box 3, folder 25, NLA.
[896] *Ibid*.
[897] Slessor, 'A.I.F. in Britain is like Trained Athletic Team', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 19 Jul 1940, 10.
[898] Kevin Blackburn, *War, Sport and the Anzac Tradition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65.

Anzac and Visual Culture

In her book *Consuming Anzac*, Jo Hawkins refers to the Anzac legend as 'Australia's most powerful brand'.[899] Arguing that the idea of Anzac has been exploited by commercial interests and commodified, Hawkins writes that, certainly by the end of the twentieth century, 'remembering war had become one of Australia's most popular pursuits'.[900] All branding and advertising benefits from the use of images to convey its core message. The Anzac 'brand' is no different in that Australians associate it with heroic images of the Australian fighting man and the battlefields he fought on. While a number of famous images were captured during the First World War, particularly by Frank Hurley, 'very few photographs of Australians in combat were published in newspapers' at that time and published images were 'restricted to choreographed photographs of AIF soldiers' which 'captured the resolute stoicism of the Australians but lacked spontaneity or any semblance of realism'.[901] By the Second World War, however, advances in photographic technology and the presence of those like Damien Parer and George Silk meant that new visual texture was added to the quilt of Anzac, further bolstering the legend's appeal and presence in everyday society. The images they captured have helped to form the Australian imagination of the Second World War and are regularly seen in books, documentaries, online and in the galleries of the Australian War Memorial. High quality moving images captured by those like Parer, along with documentary films like *Sons of the Anzacs* (1943), have helped to give the Anzac 'brand' and mythology life.

The photographic work done by those like Parer and Silk had not been possible in the First World War. What has been called 'modern photoreportage' emerged largely from Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s due to significant improvements in camera technology and the growth of photo magazines.[902] With the field of photojournalism firmly established by the outbreak of the Second World War, the conflict provided what Michael Griffin has called 'the ultimate proving ground for photo-reporting on a massive scale', with the full force of the medium coming of age.[903] Higher quality cameras, along with the possibility of supplying moving pictures for newsreels and documentary films, meant that visual materials were invested with a great deal of cultural potential. This was because the footage captured by war cameramen was capable of 'ultimately supplying national symbols of patriotism, solidarity, death, and sacrifice'.[904] The supply of these symbolic and mythic images can have the effect of creating 'historical icons [which] represent consensus narratives condensed in familiar, emotionally charged scenes'.[905] As the bedrock of the Anzac legend had already been laid, cameramen like Parer, who was a devout follower of the Anzac mystique, only had to add further flesh to the bones, expanding the visual imagination far beyond the shores of Gallipoli.

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[899] Jo Hawkins, *Consuming Anzac: The History of Australia's Most Powerful Brand* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018).
[900] *Ibid.*, 129.
[901] Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 76.
[902] Tim N. Gidal, *Modern Photojournalism: Origin and Evolution, 1910-1933* (NY: Collier Books, 1973), 5.
[903] Griffin, "The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism", 125.
[904] *Ibid.*, 122-123.
[905] *Ibid.*,129.

This is certainly what Parer was trying to do through his work. Writing to Max Dupain in December 1940, he stated that his job was to 'build a true picture of the Australian soldier in movie and stills' and 'keep newspapers and newsreels supplied with really hot spectacular news'.[906] This 'true picture' was, for him, one that celebrated their heroics and camaraderie on the battlefield. As Ken G. Hall, who edited Parer's work as the head of Cinesound Productions, later wrote, Parer had an 'almost mystic devotion to the men of the AIF', which no doubt had been influenced partly by his time working with Charles Chauvel, whose nationalistic influence was discussed in chapter five.[907] Indeed, whenever he was in Sydney on leave, Parer regularly met with Chauvel in Frank's Coffee Lounge on Pitt Street, such was their enduring friendship and regard for each other's work.[908] This devotion to the men of the AIF was almost childlike in its simplicity and uninhibited adulation. In an essay that he likely wrote in 1941 or 1942 entitled 'A Cameraman looks at the Digger', for example, Parer wrote that the Australian soldier's 'whole existence is bound up with his cobbers' and that 'These men are hard with others who don't measure up to their own Spartan standards'.[909] The slouch hat, meanwhile, was a symbol of their 'character and personality'.[910] He goes on to lament the fact that, in his view, these men were not sufficiently appreciated at home because their deeds were not truly knowable unless actually witnessed. 'It is difficult for the average man', he wrote, 'to understand the job this frontline infantryman is doing up North, and his attitude to it … They must be seen to be realised'.[911] The camera could provide one means of bringing these deeds home to the average Australian, capturing the moments that epitomised the Anzac legend. The cameraman's duty, he believed, was 'to see these things and record them'.[912]

Parer's desire to capture the essence of the Anzac legend on film was something that he had been refining since he first set sail for the Middle East in January 1940. This essence would be found to the greatest degree, he believed, among the ranks of the infantry. Writing in his diary shortly before he filmed most of the shots that constituted *Assault on Salamaua* (1943), for example, he carefully noted his ideas for what he called 'an infantry section film'. This film would convey a similar laudatory message as *Kokoda Front Line* (1942), but would build even more heavily on the idea of 'mateship'. Planning one scene, Parer envisaged it as a romanticised celebration of the Anzac tradition:

> The camera tilts down, a wounded lad, a close up of his sweating face. His cobber with him. This is wonderful mateship and it is the common thread with the last war's Anzac. For the first time in our newsreel coverage of this war we are working with a clear central theme. A theme that will stand the test of time because of its essential truth. Its propaganda value is a by-product. It is the truth that Will Dyson painted in the last war. The greatest binding force in our army is mateship. This is found to the

[906] Parer letter to Max Dupain, Dec 1940, MLMSS 1097/2, SLNSW.
[907] Ken G. Hall, *Australian Film: The Inside Story* (Sydney: Summit Books, 1980), 131.
[908] Hetherington, *Australians: Nine Profiles*, 180.
[909] Parer essay, 'A Cameraman looks at the Digger', c. 1941-42, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
[910] *Ibid.*
[911] *Ibid.*
[912] *Ibid.*

highest degree in the infantry platoons and sections. The particular quality of this mateship is uniquely Anzac.[913]

Figure 23: Still from "Assault on Salamaua", 13 July 1943 (Damien Parer, AWM)

Parer's 'infantry section film' became *Assault on Salamaua* and contains perhaps his most famous shot: that of the temporarily blinded 'digger' (Private William Johnson) being assisted across a creek by a fellow Australian soldier, Sergeant Gordon Ayre. The sequence captures the spirit of mateship that Parer sought to evoke through his filmmaking. Writing in his diary after capturing his footage, he wrote that:

> This afternoon a lad, assisted by a good Anzac, came along the track. He had a dressing over his forehead covering his eyes, and his arm was in a sling. I got a walking shot of him … The rain started to come down, and as Gordon was helping him across the creek a line of carriers passed them. I got a long shot of the bloke and a close-up. They are the best two I have done so far. Perhaps it's a copy of George Silk's blinded digger, but it's effective just the same'.[914]

This image has become one of the iconic shots of the Australian experience of war in the Pacific.[915] The emotions it evokes encapsulate the core themes of the film that Parer sought to create, its message clear to Australian audiences. In this way, the sequence (which was also reproduced in still images) holds great cultural symbolism because it condenses the key

[913] Parer diary, 20 Jun 1943, MLMSS 1097/1, SLNSW.
[914] Parer diary, 13 Jul 1943, MLMSS 1097/1, SLNSW.
[915] McDonald and Brune, *200 Shots*, 179.

concepts of the Anzac legend into a single image. This is the cultural power of photojournalism at play, something that Parer was quite conscious of. As Michael Griffin has argued, the media's visual representations of war 'inevitably reflect cultural perspectives and reproduce traditions of cultural representations … invoke[ing] notions of ethnic identity and nationalist mythology'.[916] Parer's work in New Guinea, which he saw as perfectly in tune with his artistic 'vision', certainly did. As a committed nationalist, Anzac provided him with the perfect lens for this vision.

The cultural symbolism invested in the blinded digger sequence is evocative too of other enduring images that have become iconic. As cited earlier, Umberto Eco has pointed to images like Robert Capa's 'Falling Soldier' of 1936 and Joe Rosenthal's 1945 photograph of six Marines raising the US flag on Iwo Jima as 'epoch making' shots which express mythic 'concepts'.[917] Rosenthal's Iwo Jima image is particularly useful in analysing Parer's work. As Marianne Fulton has written, the image is 'arguably the most famous photograph to come out of World War II [and] is an excellent example of the photograph as icon. People believed in the spirit it conveyed and were cheered by its sense of victory over adversity'.[918] A similar theme is expressed in Parer's blinded digger shots. The Iwo Jima image is particularly notable for its immediate impact in the United States and for the lasting effect it has had on the American cultural memory of the war in the Pacific.[919] When *Life* magazine first published the photograph, they did so alongside an image of Emanuel Leutze's painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* to signify the national and symbolic importance of the event.[920] The image is, therefore, a perfect example of what Michael Griffin has described as the process by which photographs can 'become largely narrative emblems, symbolic more than descriptive, and war photography becomes the symbolizing of national and mythic narratives', thus shaping 'collective memory'.[921] Rosenthal had, according to the editors of *U.S. Camera* magazine, 'recorded the soul of the nation'.[922]

When *Assault on Salamaua* was released in September 1943, Parer's famous shot was immediately seized upon, appearing on the front page of numerous newspapers which celebrated Ayre's help for his 'wounded comrade' as a perfect encapsulation of the Anzac spirit.[923] Parer himself pushed this heroic narrative, righteously declaring that:

> Some of these men have passed all limits of physical endurance. They are now living on their spirit alone—their guts—but they won't give up, because they'll never let their cobbers down. And they'll never let you down either. If these pictures can convey to you even a vague idea of the extent of their sacrifice, if they can put into

[916] Michael Griffin, "Media Images of War", *Media, War & Conflict* 3, no. 1 (2010): 7-8.
[917] Eco, "A Photograph", in *Travels in Hyperreality*, 216.
[918] Marianne Fulton, "Bearing Witness: The 1930s to the 1950s", in *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, ed. Marianne Fulton (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1988), 160-161.
[919] *Ibid.*, 160-161.
[920] Griffin, "The Great War Photographs: Constructing Myths of History and Photojournalism", 144.
[921] *Ibid.*, 147-148.
[922] Cited in Fulton, "Bearing Witness", 161.
[923] *The Newcastle Sun*, 17 Sep 1943, 1.

> your mind but a fraction of the deep respect and admiration I have for them, then the little I've been able to do is more than worthwhile.[924]

The defining image that conveyed this conception of the contemporary 'digger' in the film was the blinded digger sequence because of its iconographic potential. At the time of writing, one can even buy a cast bronze figurine of the image for $200 online, or a 1940s press cut out of it for close to $1,000, such is its enduring appeal.[925] Hawkins's conception of the Anzac 'brand' appears, therefore, to be alive and well. In the built environment too, the image has been recreated, with a statue of the scene, simply entitled 'mateship', being erected at the cenotaph in Shepparton, Victoria in 2000.[926] In the 2006 film *Kokoda*, meanwhile, a recreation of the scene takes place, despite Parer having filmed the sequence at Salamaua—as Hank Nelson has claimed, this 'is obviously a case of exploiting a known image with strong associations; but to take an image from another time and place and relocate it … is misleading'.[927]

A further point of comparison between Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph and Parer's work concerns the questions of authenticity surrounding the former. Rosenthal has long been accused of 'staging' the image, or at least presenting it in a misleading manner. The flag raising was not in fact a spur of the moment photographic capture, but rather a carefully composed re-hoisting of a second, much larger flag atop Mount Suribachi after the initial action had already been performed. When it appeared on the front pages of numerous newspapers and magazines, a war-weary American public 'recognised its aesthetic power' (the image has since been reproduced in numerous guises), with many believing that it represented a victory on Iwo Jima.[928] The battle for Iwo Jima was, however, still raging, meaning that the flag raising 'was neither marking a specific victory nor was it a strategically important event from a military standpoint'.[929] Indeed, 'Thanks to [Rosenthal's] photograph, the second flag raising on Suribachi became as symbolically significant to the American public as that episode was strategically insignificant to the course of the Iwo Jima campaign'.[930] Rosenthal's image is, therefore, a work of art rather than a true documentation of the battlefield.

Parer, for all his talk of the documentary form and building 'a true picture' of the battlefield, as he wrote to Dupain, was also consciously engaging in a similar form of mythmaking. It must be remembered that for the duration of his career covering Australian troops, Parer was employed by the Department of Information with the primary objective of providing material

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[924] Damien Parer, introduction to *Assault on Salamaua* newsreel, Cinesound Productions, 1943.
[925] See <https://armyshop.com.au/naked-army-mateship-walking-wounded-ng-figurine/ >. And <https://douglasstewart.com.au/product/during-the-advance-on-salamaua-sergeant-gordon-raymond-charles-ayre-mm-in-pouring-rain-assists-a-wounded-mate-private-william-oswald-wallace-johnson/ >. Both accessed 17 Feb 2022.
[926] See <https://vwma.org.au/explore/memorials/3197>. Accessed 17 Feb 2022.
[927] Nelson, "Kokoda: Pushing the Popular Image", 92.
[928] Melissa Renn, "'The Famous Iwo Flag-Raising': Iwo Jima Revisited", *History of Photography* 39, no 3 (2015): 256.
[929] *Ibid.*, 256.
[930] Parker Bishop Albee, Jr and Keller Cushing Freeman, *Shadow of Suribachi: Raising the Flags on Iwo Jima* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), xii. Cited in *Ibid.*, 256.

‘for publicity purposes’.[931] During his tenure as Director of the Department in 1940, Keith Murdoch had declared that while the Department would aim to show the ‘true colours’ of events on the battlefield, it would endeavour to capture and distribute images that would ‘stir the inner thoughts of men, and go deeper and try and touch the spirit’.[932]

Not only did Parer understand this core function of the Department, he wholeheartedly subscribed to their propagandistic vision. In an article he wrote shortly after the release of *Assault on Salamaua*, for instance, he praised the German propaganda machine for its effectiveness in winning people over to the ‘national cause’. ‘When the war broke out in 1939’, he wrote:

> the Germans had a large, well-organised and efficient group of writers, photographers, radio-men and film-men operating under their Ministry of Propaganda. Each brigade had its team … The most striking of all successes in propaganda, I think, were scored by the German films. Imagine the terrific effect on wavering neutrals of *Baptism of Blood* (after the Polish campaign) [a more accurate translation is *Baptism of Fire*, 1940] and of *Victory in the West* (after the overwhelming of France) [1941].[933]

Regardless of the message conveyed by these films, Parer could not help but admire them as effective and artistic propaganda pieces. Though Maslyn Williams later wrote that ‘Parer was *not* a propagandist by choice’ (as noted in chapter five), it seems that in fact Parer viewed his artistic vision as not too indistinct from the core propaganda message that the Department of Information and, therefore, the government sought to convey. Furthermore, he also likely drew inspiration on this matter from one of his great influences, John Grierson. As discussed in chapter five, Grierson’s pioneering work in the field of documentary film had helped to shape Parer’s conception of his own work. In an article entitled ‘Propaganda for Democracy’, Grierson had argued that propaganda encouraged vital ‘national unity’ and the ability of the population ‘to withstand the temptation of easy totalitarian solutions’.[934] As an ardent nationalist, Parer no doubt also recognised the desirability of his work encouraging national unity in a propagandistic way.

The art of Parer’s war photography was, he believed, the conveyance of the ‘true’ image of the heroic Australian fighting man. He believed in this sincerely and had no qualms about its usage as propaganda material. He viewed photography and film as providing a means by which propaganda could be impregnated with this artistic ‘truth’. Writing in his notebook while in New Guinea, for example, Parer claimed that:

> It is time we realised that shouting defiantly and dogmatically from the soap-box has ceased to convince people of the truth of our message. It may be partially because of the overuse of this method that the word propaganda has come to have such an ugly ring. It has been defined as “organised lying”. As soon as an article is dubbed “propaganda” it is suspect. Our Nation needs an honest and sincere approach … How

[931] Sir Henry Gullett, War Cabinet addendum, 4 Jan 1940, AWM315: 653/001/003, AWM.
[932] Cited in Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*, 56.
[933] *The Herald* (Melbourne), 25 Sep 1943, 7.
[934] John Grierson, “Propaganda for Democracy”, *Spectator*, 11 Nov 1938, 799.

> often have the unstudied and hesitant words of some service hero fresh from the battle-front aroused more real National feelings than a whole sitting of Parliament. The day of bawling propaganda has passed. Our publicity and information media should be impregnated with sincerity … Our journalism, radio, film, and photography all need this.[935]

This artistic 'truth', however, was a varnished truth which was designed to convey a particular message. As Fay Anderson has written, the government's control over the publication of visual material like Parer's was 'to ensure that images of Australian soldiers subscribed to particular political and military values. These ideals were immortalised by the "Anzac legend"'.[936] Parer fully identified with this goal and it is clear that the word 'propaganda' did not have negative connotations for him. Of course, there was ineffective or insincere propaganda, but when, in his opinion, it was done correctly, it could hold both artistic and national value. The Department of Information and the Army Directorate of Public Relations certainly were supportive of the message that Parer sought to convey through his work. When, for instance, Secretary of the Department Robert Hawes wrote to Errol Knox at the Directorate in December 1942, he was full of commendation for Parer. Recommending that Parer's name be passed to the Prime Minister and 'recorded for … courageous and meritorious service', Hawes praised the 'tenacity' that Parer must have shown to capture his pictures.[937] Knox agreed, writing to General Blamey of his high regard for Parer's 'frontline films'.[938]

Parer's material output, therefore, was certainly in line with his employer's expectations because it was imbued with Anzac mythology, building on the work of his predecessors. As an official photographer, his work could be used to convey a narrative of conflict that would, as historian Kevin Foster has written, 'reflect and amplify the state's official responses to the given conflict'.[939] Parer's images told 'conventionalized and simplified' stories about the Australian fighting men, becoming 'a key tool for interpreting the war in ways consonant with long-standing understandings about how war is supposed to be waged'.[940] As Barbie Zelizer has written, images can 'reduce complex issues and circumstances to memorable but simplistic visual frames'.[941] Much of Parer's work, particularly in New Guinea, bears this hallmark.

If, then, his work condensed the battlefield to simplistic narratives of Australian heroism, what does this mean for Parer's commitment to the 'documentary approach'? Certainly John

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935 Parer papers, MLMSS 1097/3, SLNSW.
936 Anderson, "'Celebrating the Anzac Spirit': The Visual Representation and Censorship of the Australian Soldier", 49.
937 Robert Hawes letter to Errol Knox, 18 Dec 1942, PR84/389, AWM.
938 Errol Knox letter to General Thomas Blamey, 21 Dec 1942, PR84/389, AWM.
939 Foster, "Regimes of Truth", 254.
940 Barbie Zelizer, "When War is Reduced to a Photograph" in *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime*, eds. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (London: Routledge, 2004), 115. Cited in Foster, "Regimes of Truth", 254.
941 Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

Treloar, who had led the Australian War Records Section in the First World War and had helped to establish the Australian War Memorial, did not feel that the Department of Information did an adequate job in reliably documenting the experience of war. Having founded the Military History and Information Section in June 1941 as 'a record-keeping, artefact collecting unit with its own pictorial arm', Treloar sought to make sure that the Department's appetite for publicity photos did not infringe upon the need to factually document all aspects of the war for posterity.[942] While the MHIS stood for 'truth' and the 'historical', Treloar claimed, the Department of Information adopted an approach which used the war, as Foster has stated, 'as a context for the creation of dramatic images calculated to persuade or stimulate'.[943]

There was some merit in Treloar's claims. Parer routinely engaged in the staging of photographs and film sequences, which again brings us back to Rosenthal's Iwo Jima image. One of Parer's most celebrated film sequences, appearing in his Academy Award winning *Kokoda Front Line* (1942), was comprised of re-enactments of events that Parer had either missed or failed to capture on camera effectively. The sequence depicts an exploding hut with Australian soldiers firing through the trees, hitting a supposedly Japanese soldier. On the dope sheet (where he wrote notes about his film sequences), however, Parer admits that 'these had to be staged as I arrived three days too late for the actual stoush'.[944] In fact, the images were not even shot at Kokoda, but rather at Salamaua. Similarly, staged sequences appeared in *Men of Timor* (1942), most notably a scene where the men of Sparrow Force (which had been conducting a guerrilla warfare operation on the island) construct a radio set, enabling them to make contact with Darwin. It was a story of Australian ingenuity in the face of long odds and extreme hardship, appealing to Parer and the Department for obvious reasons. The radio had been constructed long before Parer arrived in late 1942. Accompanying his pictures, Parer also wrote propaganda pieces in the press, writing shortly after the release of *Men of Timor* that 'In spite of all the hardships, the extreme danger, and the isolation, our troops are maintaining a magnificently high morale: there is no despair and little complaining, only a firm resolve to keep an Australian foothold on the island and to kill as many Japs as possible'.[945] Parer also requested that Sparrow Force recreate for his camera some of the tactics used in their guerrilla operations, writing on one of the dope sheets that 'this and subsequent shots of this patrol are staged. I couldn't get shots of this kind of fighting as the shot had changed now … but in the early days this type of patrol and ambushes were in the fashion'.[946] This was not a practice that Parer employed only in the Pacific—even as far back as the capture of Derna in January 1941 he had requested that the men re-enact their advance on the town for him.[947]

It seems that Parer staged these shots not with intent to deceive, but rather to highlight what he believed was an underlying truth (primarily the heroism of the Australian troops). There

[942] Foster, "Regimes of Truth", 261.
[943] *Ibid.*, 262.
[944] Cited in Neil McDonald, "The Making of Kokoda Front Line", *Film-Historia* 3, nos. 1-2 (1993): 356.
[945] *Truth* (Sydney), 3 Jan 1943, 8.
[946] Cited in Foster, "Regimes of Truth", 269.
[947] McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 98.

was, however, a certain level of disingenuity here, particularly given the fact that Parer had claimed to fellow war correspondent James Aldridge not long after the capture of Derna that 'I stage nothing'.[948] As briefly discussed in chapter six, Robert Capa's photograph of the Spanish militiaman supposedly at the point of his death is an interesting comparison. As John Taylor has written, 'The authenticity of the image rests in its representing a contemporary wish for warfare. It is an emblematic image: it suggests that individuals have ideals and are prepared to die for them. It proposed that war remained the arena of individual honour and bravery, and that even paying the ultimate sacrifice furthered the cause'.[949] Parer's images, particularly those like the 'blinded digger', were intended to achieve something similar, encapsulating as they do simplistic ideas about Anzac heroism, perseverance and mateship.

This attempt to capture an 'underlying truth' was, in essence, not dissimilar from what Frank Hurley (with whom Parer, as discussed in chapter six, had clashed so much in the Middle East) was trying to achieve through his use of composite photographs. In fact, Hurley had arguably been more open about his distortions, writing in his diary in October 1917 that his composites 'will be no delusion to the public as they will be distinctly titled, setting forth the number of negatives used, etc. All of the elements will be taken in action'.[950] Yet Hurley had been lambasted by Bean in the First World War for this technique, who believed that 'photographs and relics sat on the same continuum, because both received and retained direct indexical impressions of the fighting'.[951] For Bean, war photographs would stand as 'sacred records', enabling 'future generations to see forever the plain simple truth'.[952]

In the case of Parer, however, because his images perfectly encapsulated the messages that the government sought to project, the 'plain simple truth' was taken to mean anything that furthered the Anzac mystique and support for the war effort. It did not matter, therefore, if Parer occasionally engaged in staging because the broader 'truth' of the images was always conveyed. In this way, Parer was quite consciously drawing on the public's general trusting attitude towards photojournalism. As Tom Wheeler has written, throughout most of its existence, photojournalism 'has acquired a special standing in the public mind, a confidence that a photo can *reflect* reality in a uniquely compelling and credible way'.[953] By presenting his staged shots as if they were reality, Parer and his employers engaged in a form of deception. As someone who genuinely believed in the truthfulness of Anzac heroics and the need to communicate them through his art, however, Parer saw no clash between his photographic practices in the field and his interest in the documentary form. His constant praise of the Australian troops and the depiction of their lives on and around the battlefields was, for him, a form of historical documentation that just so happened to fit in with the propaganda aims of his employers.

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[948] *Ibid.*, 107.
[949] Taylor, *Body Horror*, 59.
[950] Hurley diary, 6 Oct 1917, cited in *The Diaries of Frank Hurley, 1912-1941*, eds. Dixon and Lee, 75.
[951] Martyn Jolly, "Australian First World War Photography: Frank Hurley and Charles Bean", *History of Photography* 23, no. 2 (1999): 141.
[952] Bean cited in *Ibid.*, 141.
[953] Tom Wheeler, *Phototruth or Photofiction? Ethics and Media Imagery in the Digital Age* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 3.

The international legitimacy accorded to the 'digger' by the success of Parer's pictures no doubt justified to him the righteousness of his work. When *Kokoda Front Line*, replete with famous images like the soldiers trapsing through knee deep mud, jointly won the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1943, becoming the first Australian film to win an Oscar and the only newsreel ever to have done so, the Australian press was enthused. In an article entitled 'American Tribute to Damien Parer', the *Daily Telegraph* proudly reported that the film 'was being applauded in Great Britain, Canada, the Middle East, the United States, Soviet Russia, China, and other United Nations'.[954] The significance of communicating the Anzac ideal to an international audience was essential in bolstering the supposed legitimacy of the legend. With the award citation praising *Kokoda Front Line* 'for its effectiveness in portraying, simply yet forcefully, the scene of war in New Guinea: and for its moving presentation of the bravery and fortitude of our Australian comrades in arms', any concerns about staging could not have been further from the minds of Parer or the Department of Information.[955] Parer himself was singled out for praise by the chief executive of the selection committee, film producer David O. Selznick, who noted 'the magnificent and courageous job he did under such adverse conditions'.[956] For Parer, as a dedicated student of film who had obsessively read and studied journals like *American Cinematographer* throughout the 1930s, the artistic legitimacy that this placed on his work must have been deeply fulfilling and a justification of his approach to his work on the frontlines.

Though it was Parer who was most widely known and celebrated for his photography of Australian troops, George Silk's work also significantly contributed to the furthering of the Anzac legend. Silk is most widely known for his famous Christmas Day 1942 photograph of the blinded 'digger' Private George 'Dick' Whittington being assisted along by the New Guinean native, Raphael Oimbari, in Buna (as discussed in the previous chapter). In depicting a kind of mateship and a spirit of perseverance, the image has obvious parallels to Parer's famous shot from *Assault on Salamaua*. Like Parer's photograph, too, it conveys a strong sense of the 'good Samaritan' in action and starkly presents the vulnerability of the depicted 'digger'. Rather than a martial depiction of the Anzac legend, the two images convey a more innocent and defenceless aspect of the soldiers' lives on the frontlines, with the central theme of blindness and thus helplessness being front and centre. In this way, the sacrificial conduct and innocence of the troops is both commemorated and celebrated for its heroic nature, with the spirit of mateship being embodied by the role of the 'good Samaritan'. For Parer, the Christian dimension of this was certainly a significant consideration, demonstrating the way in which his religiosity affected his work.

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[954] *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Jul 1943, 23.
[955] *Ibid*.
[956] *Ibid*.

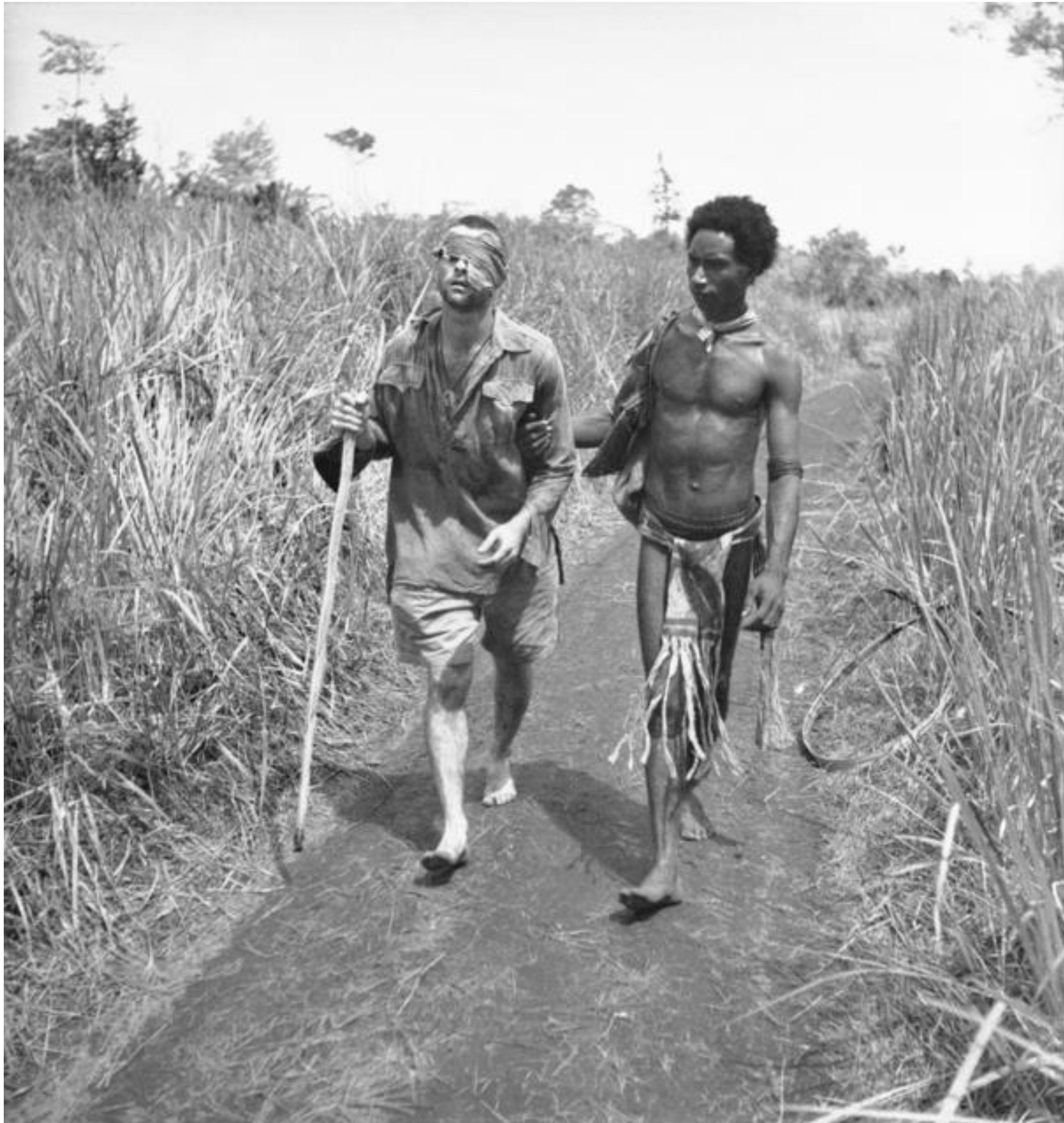

Figure 24: Raphael Oimbari assisting George 'Dick' Whittington, 25 December 1942, (George Silk, AWM)

Popularly referred to as the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel' photograph, though Silk's image was first published in *Life* magazine in March 1943, it was soon seized upon by the Department of Information as an excellent example of the Anzac spirit in action. In May 1943 the Department published *War in New Guinea: Official War Photographs of the Battle for Australia*. 'This book', it was noted, 'is not meant to be a complete history of the Papuan campaign, but rather a record of one phase of it as seen by the factual camera of George Silk, a Dept. of Information photographer'.[957] Despite the fact that Silk had already left the Department by this time, his name was still used and his pictures celebrated for providing a record of the Australian troops' heroics in New Guinea. This record was 'dedicated to the men who drove the Japs from Papua and published so that the rest of Australia can see how

[957] Department of Information, *War in New Guinea: Official War Photographs of the Battle for Australia* (Sydney: F. H. Johnston Publishing, 1943), n.p.

they did it', with the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel' photograph featuring on the first page of the book.[958] Partly as a result of Silk's photograph, which provided a moving visual portrait of their role in the conflict, the New Guinean natives increasingly found a place for themselves as willing assistants to the 'diggers' within the Anzac narrative of the war in the Pacific. The photograph clearly meant a lot to Oimbari, who, as a symbolic figurehead of the native contribution to the war thanks to Silk's shot, was later awarded an OBE in 1993. 'The Queen's award to me', he wrote, 'is a recognition of the work of native carriers during the war … my services to the Australian and the American forces is finally recognised'.[959]

On the photograph, Silk later said that 'this native is helping the man so tenderly, it's a very compassionate picture—and I saw all this just in a flash, and I felt it in me, and for a second I thought, God, I've got to take a picture'.[960] Silk then 'got over the emotion part, and I went and talked to him and got his name'.[961] Silk's emotional detachment from his work, as demonstrated here by his determination to get Whittington's name despite the man's obvious affliction, is demonstrative of his genuine interest in documenting the experience of war while retaining an element of distance from it in a way that Parer, who constantly wrote of his love and respect for the 'digger', did not. Through photographs like those displayed in *War in New Guinea*, Silk fulfilled his brief as a Department of Information photographer to supply photos that would be useful for publicity purposes, but he never expressed a genuine commitment to the Anzac ideal. As he noted after the war, 'You are after the actuality. There's a document happening in front of you and you try to freeze it'.[962] While photographs like his 'Still game as Ned Kelly', taken in Alexandria in June 1941 and depicting three smiling soldiers with their arms around each other, contributed to furthering the image of Anzac 'spirit' and mateship, Silk did not view this as an essential element of his art. Despite this, however, his work could still be used to promote Anzac through endeavours like *War in New Guinea*.

Reviewing the book, the *Sydney Morning Herald* praised Silk's work at the 'vanguard' of the battlefield, noting his determination to record 'with sympathy the heroic performance of those who saved Australia in the dangerous days of 1942'.[963] The book is, however, an illustration only of what the Department allowed to be seen of Silk's work, excluding his more graphic depictions of death and suffering on the battlefield. As Kevin Foster has stated, 'the public was permitted access to only as much of this information as the authorities deemed they could handle or the dominant cultural narratives could articulate … where the available truths were too confronting, they were ignored, edited out, or withheld'.[964] When publications like the *Sydney Morning Herald*, therefore, reported on Silk's daring on the frontlines, they were referring to this in the context of him providing material which

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[958] *Ibid.*, n.p.
[959] 'Statement by Raphael Oimbari on Queen's Award', 14 Jun 1993, AWM PR01732.
[960] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.
[961] *Ibid*.
[962] *Ibid*.
[963] Cited in Robin Gerster, "War by Photography: Shooting Japanese in Australia's Pacific War", *History of Photography* 40, no. 4 (2016): 433-434.
[964] Foster, "Regimes of Truth", 274-5.

reinforced traditional understandings of the Australian fighting man rather than for an accurate rendering of the realities of war. As discussed in the previous chapter, this side of Silk's work was glossed over in the Australian press and in publications like *War in New Guinea*. One picture that was published in the book for the first time was his photograph of a group of Australian soldiers attacking Japanese pillboxes on the way into Buna. One of the men depicted was killed just after Silk captured the photograph and he noted this in the caption he provided to the Department, which was subsequently cut.[965] Yet the photograph still featured in the book, with no reference made to it being the very last moments of one of the soldiers' lives. As such, the photograph was 'stripped of vital identifying information and reduced to a generic action picture', effectively whitewashing the man's death.[966]

Through the absence of images portraying death and suffering, therefore, *War in New Guinea* and the general approach of the Department to the publishing of images reflects the oversimplification of war as represented by the Anzac legend. This frustrated Silk, who later pointed out that many of his documentary shots were not published, most likely because they served no significant publicity purpose. 'I shot a whole bunch of sea battles at night with star shells and flying flak', he recounted, 'the kind of thing a magazine today would use for a six-page lead—and they were never even proofed'.[967] Though he had no great aversion to his images being used for Anzac-inspired publicity purposes, Silk primarily saw himself as a documenter of war. He could take photographs of whatever he pleased when on the frontlines, but, so long as he remained employed by the Department of Information, many of them would not be released to the public.

In this way, Silk's photographs were managed by the Department while he remained in Australian employment, with several of his images proving to be useful in the furtherance of the Anzac legend. Unlike Parer, who had an obsessive preoccupation with capturing on film what he believed to be a truthful rendering of Australian troops, Silk showed no great interest in following a similar path. Though he understood and greatly fulfilled the demands of his job as an official war photographer, the desire to add further flesh to the Anzac legend was not a primary goal for him. This did not prevent, however, his 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel' photograph from becoming a defining image of the legend in action in the Second World War, which has continued to be reproduced in various guises to this day. In this way, once the photograph had entered the public domain, it was no longer Silk's to control, its 'meaning' being shaped by those who published it. Parer, on the other hand, regularly engaged with his work after it was released for public consumption, explaining both in the press and in the introduction to some of his films his high regard for the 'digger' and what he sought his audience to understand by watching his films. Parer's was a conscious engagement with national mythmaking, believing the material that he sought to produce to be essential in rallying people to a vital national cause. What seems clear is that the approach adopted by the Department of Information ensured that its official photographers would provide an output that would consistently add further layers to the Anzac mystique developed in the First World War. It was so successful

[965] *Ibid.*, 273.
[966] *Ibid.*, 274.
[967] Silk cited in Lakin, *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection*, 108.

in this that several of Parer's and Silk's images remain recognisable, becoming cultural touchstones in the popular memory of Australia's role in the war, particularly in the Pacific.

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The War Correspondent as Myth: The Case of Damien Parer

I began this thesis with reference to the memorial erected in memory of Australia's war correspondents in 2015 in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial. War correspondents have been both celebrated and commemorated for their roles in conveying to audiences at home the news of 'what really happened' on the battlefield. The 'popular image of the war correspondent in the public imagination', writes historian David Welch (and as cited earlier in the chapter), 'is of a gallant, heroic figure bringing us impartial reports from conflict zones around the world'.[968] This also assumes a certain masculinity at the heart of the profession, with the traditional image of the heroic war correspondent being an almost exclusively male domain. As the historian Jeannine Baker has written in her study of Australian women war reporters (and as I cited in the introduction), the 'enduring image of a war correspondent is adventurous, individualistic, and undeniably masculine … The mythology, and its edge of glamour, was one that male correspondents themselves encouraged and revelled in'.[969] In the Australian context, the added layer of the Anzac legend, itself a male-dominated myth, has injected a sense that Australian war correspondents should not only report on the heroics of the troops, further bolstering the myth, but also embody the values that the legend represents themselves. This reflects the process by which, potentially, 'war reporters not only play a role in the creation of a heroic narrative of war, but are also often assigned the status of heroes themselves'.[970] This is particularly true in the case of Damien Parer, who this section will focus on. The myth which enveloped Parer during his life and, particularly, after his death warrants extensive analysis. Unlike the other correspondents considered here, Parer died in his role. He was killed by Japanese machine-gun fire on the island of Peleliu in September 1944 while working for Paramount News USA. Parer was seen to have died *for* something, and the richness of the sources on this subject effectively demonstrate how the mythmaker may in turn become part of the myth themselves.

The two factors which enshrined the 'Parer legend' were his ability and determination to bring Australian audiences 'closer' to the troops and events on the battlefield, alongside his death on the battlefield at the age of thirty-two. In this way Parer bears a striking resemblance to fellow celebrated war correspondents Ernie Pyle and Neil Davis. Pyle, an American correspondent who reported from both the European and Pacific theatres of the Second World War, was 'the first (and perhaps only) [American] war reporter to become a genuine national hero', with his column being 'read in at least 14 million homes nationwide'.[971] Killed on the battlefield in Okinawa in April 1945, Pyle was renowned for his ability to bring the experience of combat to life for his readers, placing the efforts of the ordinary G.I. at the centre of his columns, often identifying them 'by name and address'.[972] Writing in 1950, the American journalist A. J. Liebling claimed that Pyle had 'contributed a stock figure to the

[968] David Welch, "Introduction: 'Winning Hearts and Minds'", xiv.
[969] Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters*, 3.
[970] Kathrin Gob, "Deconstructing the Heroic Myth of the War Correspondent—Chris Ayres's Memoir *War Reporting for Cowards*", *helden. heroes. Héros*, Special Issue 1 (2014): 61.
[971] Richard Fine, "The Development of the 'Pyle Style' of War Reporting: French North Africa, 1942-1943", *Media History* 23, nos. 3-4 (2017): 376.
[972] *Ibid.*, 377.

waxworks gallery of American history as popularly remembered. To a list that includes the frontiersman, the Kentucky colonel, the cowboy, and Babe Ruth … [Pyle] added G. I. Joe, the suffering but triumphant infantryman'.[973] In his efforts to place the second generation 'digger' at the heart of his work, Parer was, through his films and photography, achieving something similar to Pyle. They both became close to the men that they were covering, were celebrated by their fellow war correspondents, and were killed in their endeavours.

Likewise, the Australian combat photographer Neil Davis, who worked as a photojournalist during the Vietnam War before being killed during an attempted coup in Thailand in 1985, was perceived by his peers to have gone above and beyond the call of duty in his search for pictures which would convey the harsh reality of war. Largely because of this, Davis became recognised, according to his biographer, as 'the bravest and most distinguished Australian news cinecameraman and war correspondent since Damien Parer … acknowledged and liked by his peers … as one of the best in the business'.[974] Davis himself said that 'I suppose in many ways Damien Parer and myself are similar characters … I feel I understand Parer reasonably well without having met him … I've seen some of Parer's combat film, and I have the same reaction as most people have … that he was crazy. But he was crazy in his own way … I know that behind my back I have been called Suicide Davis, or Death-Wish Davis'.[975] Partly because of the extraordinary risks they took to ensure that the quality of their pictures matched the heights of their ambitions, Parer and Davis were viewed by their peers as the leading practitioners of conflict photojournalism in their respective eras. The recognition accorded to Davis by his fellow war correspondents was reminiscent of the praise heaped upon Parer by those who knew and worked alongside him. This recognition from fellow journalists was an important way in which Parer, Davis and Pyle transcended from the 'rank and file' war correspondents to a mythic plain in which they appeared to embody certain values. In the Australian context, and particularly in the case of Parer, the association of the journalist with the qualities that constitute the Anzac legend has led to a reverence which lives long after the journalist has died.

In speaking about Parer, his fellow war correspondents used language enthused with mythic elements, often drawing on Anzac qualities to describe him. The deployment of mythic language to describe themselves and their profession has been a tool routinely adopted by war correspondents. Commenting on Mark Pedelty's study of correspondents in El Salvador, Colleen Murrell has observed that they 'were all imbued with a sense of heroism that is bound up with the perceived myths of the role of the war reporter as an intrepid truth-seeker … they have absorbed the myths of heroism, and made them part of themselves'.[976] In thinking of themselves as being a heroic profession, there is a temptation for war correspondents to hold themselves and their peers up as examples of their sacrificial endeavours. In Parer's case, he paid the ultimate price for his work and was therefore

[973] A. J. Liebling, "Pyle Set the Style", *New Yorker*, 2 Sep 1950, 70.
[974] Tim Bowden, *One Crowded Hour: Neil Davis—Combat Cameraman (1934-1985)* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2013), ix-x.
[975] Cited in *Ibid.*, 420-421.
[976] Murrell, *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering*, 34.

emblematic of this supposedly heroic nature of war reporting. He was, therefore, a symbol of the intrepid work conducted by correspondents at great risk to themselves. In conveying this, the language used to describe him by Parer's peers regularly invoked his intense religiosity, helping to attach greater meaning to his obsessive desire to photograph Australian troops. Ron Maslyn Williams, for example, was for much of his post-war life a kind of custodian to Parer's legacy, regularly corresponding with writers, filmmakers, documentarists and others who were inspired by the Parer story.[977] A fellow Catholic, Williams helped to inject a sense of fatalism to Parer's legend. 'There was a straight line from Derna [where Parer first filmed in front of the advancing Australian troops] to the day he was killed', Williams wrote after the war, 'There was no doubt that from then on Parer was doomed'.[978] Kenneth Slessor too, himself close to Parer having worked alongside him since 1940, wrote that 'those who knew Damien Parer knew that he could never be content with an easy reputation. He chose the hard way, and for him the war could end only with the bullet which killed him'.[979] Statements like these helped to bolster the idea that Parer's was a life lived both heroically and selflessly, ultimately sacrificing himself not only for his pictures, but for his country (even though he was in American employment at the time of his death).

Parer's own writings, where he considered the possibility of his death, reflected this sense that his mortal life was a secondary concern to his pictures and that his fate was already sealed. Writing in his diary in late 1943, for example, he noted that 'I had a feeling that I might cop it today and repeated my trust in Our Lady's protection. Not only from death but if I was to die to do it well'.[980] In perhaps his most revealing entry on this subject, Parer wrote that 'Strangely enough I have become sort of resigned to the idea of being killed in this show'.[981]

Parer's seemingly scant regard for death made it easy to depict his life as a quasi-religious crusade. Drawing on Parer's piety and his ability to mix with the 'ordinary man', Williams wrote that he was:

> part-child, part-poet, part-genius, part-saint … his whole life was a crusade. Before everything, he was a Catholic. Next he was an artist, with an artist's belief in beauty and truth. Then he was an Australian. He could swear and pray in the same breath. Prayer to him was as natural as the idiomatic expression of everyday life.[982]

His deep Catholic faith added a highly distinctive element to Parer's character and allowed those like Williams to establish a discourse surrounding him which emphasised the mystical quality of his life and work. Writing in *Green Armour*, for example, Osmar White stated that 'I think Parer must be a genius. It is certain that he is a man of immense character. He is a devout Roman Catholic. I understand, now, the quality that makes him say his prayers

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[977] See, for example, Maslyn Williams papers, MS 3936, boxes 9-10 and 37, NLA.
[978] Cited in Legg, *The Eyes of Damien Parer*, 19.
[979] *The Sun* (Sydney), 25 Sep 1944, 5.
[980] Parer diary, 27 Nov 1943, MLMSS 1097/1, SLNSW.
[981] Cited in Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 165.
[982] *Advocate* (Melbourne), 11 Oct 1944, 13.

without fail, night and morning, wherever he is'.[983] It is no wonder then that Catholic publications sought to promote Parer as one of their own as he increasingly became seen in the years following his death as a patriotic symbol—a kind of present-day Australian martyr. The *Catholic Weekly* reported in 1947 that Parer:

> is one of Australia's most popular and famous war heroes. This is a rare distinction among non-combatants. Parer gained it because, in the process of getting his incomparable 'action' pictures, he, time and again, showed more daring and less regard for his own skin than might reasonably be expected of a fully-armed combatant soldier.[984]

He was, the same paper reported immediately after his death, a 'magnificent Australian and Catholic'.[985] The Catholic *Southern Cross*, meanwhile, claimed that 'The loss of this splendid genius … has been rightly felt by all to be a real Australian tragedy … it was the power of the Faith which made Damien Parer the bright flame of splendour that he was … he was the kind of person of whom we read in the old books of chivalry'.[986] In claiming Parer as simultaneously a great Australian hero and great Catholic, the Catholic Church in Australia was attempting to bolster their own legitimacy and highlight the contributions that their members had made to Australian national life. During and after the debates concerning conscription in 1916 and 1917, for example, Irish-Australian Catholics had been demonised by Australian Empire loyalists as 'un-Australian' and disloyal.[987] The contributions of Catholics like Parer to national life perhaps offered a useful way to discredit any claims of disloyalty in the current conflict. As Parer's faith was an inescapable aspect of his identity, it was routinely mentioned in the same breath as his patriotism. His total and utter belief in the Catholic faith, so the discourse went, enabled Parer to take the risks that he did and steeled his determination to serve his country in the best way that he knew how: with his camera.

The idea that Parer *fought* for his country with his technical equipment heightened the sense that his work during the war had been a sacrificial endeavour. The *War Pictorial News* reported shortly after his death, for instance, that 'Parer's story is that of other men who fought for the Allied cause, not with gun or grenade, but with pen, microphone and camera, and in so doing have given their all'.[988] He had no gun to defend himself, took no lives, but was killed while, in a sense, fighting the war. This was a perspective pushed too by his fellow war correspondents, who perhaps saw in Parer someone who was glamourising the profession, bringing home to the public the risks that all correspondents took in combat zones. Parer was, according to White, 'the forerunner of the modern photo war correspondent. He was there when it happened, he got it on film in the most incredible conditions at an enormous cost to himself'.[989] Writing in 1942, meanwhile, George Johnston highlighted the 'almost daily risks' taken by Parer, continuing that 'Parer risked his life for

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[983] White, *Green Armour*, 205.
[984] *Catholic Weekly* (Sydney), 2 Jan 1947, 9.
[985] *Catholic Weekly* (Sydney), 28 Sep 1944, 4.
[986] *Southern Cross* (Adelaide), 13 Oct 1944, 3.
[987] Meaney, "Australian Irish Catholics and Britishness", 28-43.
[988] *War Pictorial News*, no. 191, 1 Jan 1945.
[989] White interview, S00981, AWM.

months in the Papuan jungle, obtaining his famous films'.[990] In this way the heroic image of the soldier was being merged with that of the war correspondent-artist. Parer's war photography was, after all, born partly out of a desire for artistic self-expression. His artistic photography was a vital element of Parer's appeal as a war correspondent, demonstrating the particular power of visual renderings of the Anzac legend.

The fact that Parer took such risks ostensibly to 'build a true picture of the Australian soldier in movie and stills', celebrating their heroics, predictably led to his being associated with all the qualities of the Anzac legend. Having done so much to capture the essence of the legend on film and in picture, Parer soon found a place for *himself* within the Anzac mythos. Chester Wilmot celebrated Parer for his ability to make 'the camera speak as no other man I've ever known … his films gave an immortal portrait of the Australian soldier of this war … it was because he felt so deeply that he was able to get close to the men and catch their spirit in his lens'.[991] Parer was promoted as an Anzac-like figure by those involved with the production of his films. Ken G. Hall of Cinesound recognised that Parer himself was a marketable character for propaganda purposes. Writing after the war, Hall noted that 'He was obviously star material … So we gave him publicity, built him up with the public and he soon became well known'.[992] This is encapsulated by Hall's decision to have Parer appear on screen, in full military uniform, and deliver a monologue at the beginning of *Kokoda Front Line*. Parer, the opening credits inform us, secured 'many amazing pictures' from New Guinea and 'has been responsible for some of the classic newsreel coverages of the war'.[993] The opening of *Kokoda Front Line*, therefore, not only states that Parer has performed some extraordinary tasks, but shows the man looking very much like one of the 'diggers' from his films. In this way, Parer fits the historian Jeannine Baker's description of the 'enduring image of a war correspondent' as 'adventurous, individualistic, and undeniably masculine'.[994] This was an enduring legacy of Parer's. Reporting in 1994 (though it reads as if it could have been written in 1944), the *Canberra Times* claimed that Parer 'exists now as he does on this page: an icon in black and white, a kind of masculine image in a soldier's uniform, a good man who died like a martyr and became a legend … who now embodies much of our national traditions'.[995]

Because Parer seemed to embody traditional Anzac values, his acrimonious departure from the Department of Information (and thus Australian employment) in August 1943 was depicted as a national tragedy by his peers and the press, particularly after his death. The press campaign against the Department, largely organised by the Parers themselves (as discussed in the previous chapter), was highly successful in depicting the institution as a petty and vindictive body which stifled Parer's patriotic and artistic ambitions. Writing after his death, Slessor claimed that Parer's:

[990] *Argus*, 18 Dec 1942, 3.
[991] Wilmot letter to Edith Wilmot, cited in McDonald, *Kokoda Front Line*, 354.
[992] Hall, *Australian Film*, 131.
[993] *Kokoda Front Line*, Cinesound Productions, 1942.
[994] Baker, *Australian Women War Reporters*, 3.
[995] *Canberra Times*, 17 Sep, 1994, 48.

bitterest disappointment was the fact that, as an American photographer during the last year of his life, he could no longer devote himself to Australian troops, who had grown to love and admire him. Someday it will be realised just what Australia lost when a petty difference about his living-expenses drove him to American employment.[996]

For Parer's correspondent peers like Slessor, his departure from Australian employment and death not long after provided a narrative which, as previously noted, highlighted the heroism of their profession. But beyond this, the narrative also reflected the obstacles that war correspondents were routinely faced with in their pursuit of stories. As the scholar Simon Cottle has written of the profession, there is 'both a professional and personal investment in the mythical "war correspondent" … [which is] rooted in the daily routines, thwarted ambitions, constraints and frustrations of war correspondents' professional practices and everyday lives'.[997] In mythologising their struggles in the role such as conflicts with official authority, war correspondents can depict themselves in a noble and heroic light. Parer's struggles with the Department of Information, which arguably (though unknowingly) led to his death, were symbolic of this. Parer, a prominent Australian nationalist who had done so much to advance the Anzac legend through a modern medium, had been lost to the Americans, it was claimed by his supporters, due to the idiocy of bureaucracy. Despite this, Parer himself continued to stress his continued allegiance to Australia, stating in the press that although he was now in American employment he would 'continue to wear my Australian uniform'.[998] After his death, his dedication to Australia coupled with his supposedly justified decision to leave the Department made for a powerful projection of Parer as someone who had given so much to Australia, yet had ultimately been driven from its service by a small group of authority figures. 'The Americans', one newspaper recorded shortly after his death, 'recognised him as an original cinematograph genius … The strange blindness of Australian officials is nothing short of staggering'.[999]

Like the larrikin 'digger' of the First World War, therefore, Parer was depicted as an ordinary man capable of doing extraordinary deeds, resentful of authority and determined to stick up for his mates. Having been celebrated by his fellow war correspondents both during and after his life, as well as by the press more generally, a mythic language surrounding Parer arose which closely tied the various elements of his character (Catholicism, patriotism, bravery and other Anzac traits) together. Parer transcended from the realms of mere reporter and mythmaker to a celebrated component of the Anzac myth himself. His death ensured that his legacy would live on, injecting a vital element of tragedy which became the focal point of his legend. Like Pyle and Davis, Parer had produced a body of work which his countrymen could be proud of. Having been seen to have both celebrated and advanced Australians' familiarity with their fighting men, all while taking extraordinary risks to himself, Parer was viewed as a model Australian who was prepared to lay down his life in the same manner as the frontline

[996] *The Sun* (Sydney), 25 Sep 1944, 5.
[997] Simon Cottle, *Mediatized Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies* (NY: Open University Press, 2006), 88.
[998] *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 4 Oct 1943, 2.
[999] *Advocate* (Melbourne), 27 Sep 1944, 4.

troops. His peers recognised this and held him up as an example of what those in their profession could achieve.

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This chapter has demonstrated how the war correspondents at the centre of this thesis contributed to the furthering and development of the Anzac legend. The legacy of their predecessors like Charles Bean provided them with a detailed blueprint of how the Australian troops might be reported on. In turn, these war correspondents routinely linked the 'diggers' of the Second World War with those of the First, providing the AIF with a miliary and spiritual heritage which was gradually added to over the course of the war. This was done via the means of various forms of media, some of which, like film and broadcasting, had not been available to the correspondents of the Great War to any significant extent. As such, new layers were consciously added to the Anzac tapestry which both reinforced traditional conceptions of 'Anzac' and contributed somewhat novel ways in which the troops might be imagined.

Parer's and Silk's artistic documentary photography, for example, conveyed a side of the legend which did not always place so much emphasis on martial aspects as it did on the vulnerability and almost saintliness of the troops. The traditional Anzac spirit of perseverance was incorporated into this, but it was done so alongside attempts to depict the 'reality' of war (even if this meant staging certain images). Rather than the heat of battle (which both men regularly depicted), their two most famous images present blindness as a central theme and strip their subjects bare of any particularly overt martial connotations, focussing instead on the nature of sacrifice. As discussed in chapter five, this stemmed from both men's deep interest in the documentary form and, in Silk's words, determination to capture 'the actuality': 'There's a document happening in front of you and you try to freeze it, but in trying to freeze it you try to bring the emotion as well that's happening there'.[1000]

[1000] Silk interview with McDonald, S00379, AWM.

Figure 25: Still from "Assault on Salamaua", 29 July 1943 (Damien Parer, AWM)

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that Parer became the most celebrated Australian war correspondent of the Second World War, held up by his peers as a shining example of how those in the profession could come to embody the key traits of Anzac themselves. Heroism and sacrifice, it seemed, were not strictly limited to those physically partaking in the fighting. Just as the Anzac legend was consistently embellished, so too was Parer's own myth, which further enhanced the reputation of the profession as a whole. While the war correspondents considered here built on the work of their First World War predecessors, therefore, Anzac to them was more than simply the establishment of a set of heroic ideals forged in blood. It offered various ways of viewing and depicting the Australian fighting man, from the hero of Classical myth to the blinded beggar reliant on the good Samaritan. These were artistic conceptions and depictions of Anzac. Can we really think of Charles Bean, in contrast, as an *artist*? I would suggest not.

Conclusion

'Ever since war became a matter of organised armies and campaigns', wrote the critic W. P. Rilla for the British *New Statesman and Nation* magazine in 1944, 'there have been men to report it: the line reaches back to Herodotus and Homer … the war reporter has to be something of a Jack-of-all-trades. He has to be soldier and writer, adventurer, political commentator and artist, thinker and man of action'.[1001] Rilla's Romanticisation of the profession is not unusual and is reflective of the prestige that is often accorded to war correspondents.[1002] There is an element of the performative in their lives and work, with the excitement of war providing the backdrop to their endeavours. Writing about his time as a correspondent during the Second World War, for instance, the novelist John Steinbeck recalled that he wore 'the costume of a war correspondent'.[1003] Amidst the carnage of the battlefield he felt as if he were 'a kind of tourist'.[1004]

Steinbeck's comments reflect the peculiar position of the war correspondent, who is caught in a kind of halfway house: he or she is a military outsider, yet embroiled in militaristic life and affairs; a 'truthful' reporter, yet is subject to censorship and often a willing contributor to propaganda; committed to the ideal of objective and authentic journalism, yet always subjective in his or her opinions and usually subject to the demands of employers. It is a dichotomy which George Orwell struggled with while working as a correspondent during the latter stages of the Second World War. His reports at that time, as Richard Lance Keeble has written, aimed 'both to admit subjectivity and yet to acquire objectivity. The paradox seems to present him with an impasse'.[1005]

And yet, despite these apparent conflicting demands of the war correspondent, there can exist in the profession tremendous space for artistic self-expression. One merely has to consider some of the international literary names to have been war correspondents to see this artistic potential of the profession: Hemingway, Steinbeck, Orwell, Crane, Waugh—the list goes on. War has long provided opportunity for artistic endeavour of all kinds. We might think of the poetry of Wilfred Owen, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the Bayeux Tapestry, or Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The role of the war correspondent, however, comes with the added demand of reporting events of historical significance to an audience which usually has no experience of conflict.

The intersection between artistic endeavour and the demands of journalism in combat zones has been explored at great length in this thesis. As noted in the introduction, the correspondents considered here all recognised the artistic and professional opportunity that

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[1001] W. P. Rilla, "Eye-Witnesses", *New Statesman and Nation*, 23 Dec 1944, 425.
[1002] Allan and Zelizer, *Reporting War*, 3.
[1003] John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (NY: Penguin Books, 1958), vii.
[1004] *Ibid.*, xiv.
[1005] Richard Lance Keeble, *Journalism Beyond Orwell* (London: Routledge, 2020), 64.

war reporting offered. This resulted at times in their personal ambitions and egos determining their actions. There was, in short, a degree of self-interest in their work, alongside a usually genuine interest in capturing that 'fleeting glimpse of truth' unfolding around them.

Moreover, the role offers the opportunity and excitement of witnessing these events. As the historians Janet Harris and Kevin Williams have argued:

> The ample literature produced by war reporters of their trials and tribulations provides a number of justifications for putting themselves at risk. One overriding justification is the notion of "being there" … He or she is the labourer at the chalkface of war and conflict, providing an eyewitness account of what happens on the battlefield … Bearing witness sits alongside a number of other factors that shape the occupational culture, including being first with the story, exposing the military and political authorities to scrutiny and producing the first "rough draft of history". Individual reporters negotiate these professional demands in different ways—shaped by personal, organisational and cultural considerations.[1006]

The attraction of bearing witness, described by the journalist David Carr as 'the oldest and perhaps most valuable tool in the journalist's arsenal', and sense of prestige associated with it, therefore, is a powerful force in luring correspondents to the war.[1007] Lonely and struggling to write at his home in Cuba after Martha Gellhorn's departure for the war in Europe, for instance, Ernest Hemingway was enticed back to war reporting in 1944. Hemingway was 'in a state of psychological crisis', but his return to conflict reporting 'acted as an anodyne for his mental state'.[1008] Writing to his son Patrick from Europe, he claimed that he had 'never been happier nor had a more useful life ever' following his return to the profession.[1009] The ability of war to provide a greater sense of purpose and serve as a kind of creative muse for those reporting on it is not to be underestimated. There is a sense in most war correspondents' minds that their work—their art—is capable of making a difference. Recalling his time spent with the famous correspondent Marie Colvin, killed in Syria in 2012, the translator Wa'el al-Omar stated that 'She wasn't childish or naïve' in taking risks to get the story, 'but she was idealistic. She was a dreamer'.[1010]

In this thesis we have seen something of the dreamer in each of the six correspondents discussed. George Silk's 'burning passion' and 'crusade to document the war' in the belief that his pictures might 'save the world from wars' is perhaps the most obvious example of this. But this ambition was common to all of them in different guises and they viewed the war as a remarkable opportunity—professionally, personally, and artistically. It could, they believed, prove to be the pinnacle of their careers or the launching pad to further success in

[1006] Harris and Williams, *Reporting War and Conflict*, 5-6.
[1007] David Carr, "At Front Lines, Bearing Witness in Real Time", *New York Times*, 27 Jul 2014.
[1008] Gladstein, "Mr. Novelist Goes to War: Hemingway and Steinbeck as Front-line Correspondents", 260. See also Terry Mort, *Hemingway at War: Ernest Hemingway's Adventures as a World War II Correspondent* (NY: Pegasus Books, 2016).
[1009] Cited in *Ibid.*, 260.
[1010] Wa'el al-Omar, cited in Lindsey Hilsum, *In Extremis: The Life of War Correspondent Marie Colvin* (London: Penguin, 2018), 372.

different fields. George Johnston, for example, had always recognised that his role as a war correspondent might afford him the prestige and ability to dedicate much of his later working life to his real interest of novel writing.

Ego certainly contributed to this ambitiousness and it has been apparent that this was a significant character trait of these correspondents, particularly Silk and Chester Wilmot. In this sense, their work was highly individualistic, fuelled by motivations which, while usually displaying a genuine engagement with their craft and the responsibilities of the war correspondent, always took into consideration journalistic and artistic self-interest. This was apparent in Wilmot's disputes with Cecil in the Middle East, Osmar White's careful guarding of stories and information that only he had access to in New Guinea, Kenneth Slessor's motivations for taking the Official War Correspondent job, and Silk's determination to have his image of a dead Australian machine-gunner published in the press, to take a few examples. In this sense, the criticism of certain war correspondents by the present-day Slovenian war reporter Boštjan Videmšek rings true. 'There is a lot of "ego-safari" in journalism, plenty of egocentrism', he writes, 'Especially war journalism has had, for a long time, this special aura about it; many journalists were celebrities, part of pop-culture almost, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world'.[1011]

Given that the role of ego certainly played some part in their motivations for reporting war and their practices in conflict zones, it is hardly surprising that, when perceived obstructions were presented to their work, they reacted with hostility. This was the case, for instance, when Silk and Damien Parer left their employment at the Department of Information, launching a press campaign to support their narrative of events, or when Slessor resigned as the Official War Correspondent following his run-ins with the Army Directorate of Public Relations. Any obstruction or significant tampering with their work was perceived as if it were a personal affront, resulting in bruised egos and, in some cases, the cessation of their employment.

While ego was certainly a contributing factor to their desire to report the war, this is not to say that each man did not take a keen interest in his journalistic craft. There was in each of them something of the man before the war, each with their own ideas about journalism, art, and national life. War reportage would be the proving ground for some of these ideas, with the cauldron of conflict serving as an ever-changing stage on which the correspondents presented their work. While they reported factual material and newsworthy stories, they retained their ability to artistically express themselves. This is particularly true of those working in the modern mediums of photography, filmmaking and radio broadcasting, but does not discount print journalists. On Stephen Crane (most famously the author of the war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*) and Ernie Pyle's artistic writing styles as war correspondents, for instance, Ronald Nelson has noted that they are 'a reflection of their

[1011] Boštjan Videmšek cited in Leonora Flis, "Profiling War: Managing Trauma in Reporting Horror—the Case of Boštjan Videmšek", in *Profile Pieces: Journalism and the 'Human Interest' Bias*, eds. Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble (NY: Routledge, 2016), 237.

dedication to craft, [and] their commitment to expressing themselves in such a way as to reach their audiences meaningfully (even profoundly) … In their dispatches they convey not only vital information to keep an eager public informed about life-and-death matters, but also the feel of being involved in the high drama of war'.[1012] We have seen something similar in the articles produced by White in New Guinea, as well as in Wilmot's radio broadcasts and Silk and Parer's images, which provided an audio and visual portal to the battlefield for audiences at home. This multimedia coverage ensured that, like never before, Australians received regular insights into the exploits of their countrymen and women with the military forces overseas which went beyond a column in the newspaper.

The ideas that the correspondents brought to their work could, of course, be influenced by a profound sense of attachment to the Allied 'cause', the Australian fighting man, and devotion to the nation. This is particularly true in the case of Parer, who, largely as a result of his intense nationalism, actively sought to add further filmic and photographic texture to the Anzac mystique, thus conveying a heavily tailored image of war to Australian audiences which profoundly shaped their imagination of events. In this way, Parer, as well as those like White and Wilmot who became increasingly embroiled in military affairs in New Guinea and actively sought to shape the narrative of events there, displayed what Mick Hume has called the 'journalism of attachment'.[1013] Rather than providing any deep analysis of the 'political and social roots of war', Hume's argument is that war reporters often merely provide simplistic and moralistic descriptions of events.[1014] These descriptions help 'to give a sense of purpose and self-importance' to war correspondents, who play upon their image as 'saintly crusaders abroad'.[1015] Certainly Parer embraced his image as a kind of 'saintly crusader' whose sole purpose was to convey the 'truth' of the Australian fighting man to audiences at home and abroad. This reverence for the digger was Parer's truth, and there can be no doubt that he felt a deep emotional attachment to the stories he sought to tell through his work as a war correspondent. In this way, Parer was to an extent a conscious mythmaker rather than a 'news man', intent on using the documentary approach to convey his message. Like the famous Polish war correspondent of the mid to late twentieth-century, Ryszard Kapuściński, Parer might well be accused of reportage which 'blurred the line between fact and fiction', his journalism touched indelibly by 'artistic embellishment'.[1016]

This is representative of the broader question as to whether correspondents operating in a war viewed as a 'matter of national survival', particularly those employed by the government, have a higher duty to seek out the truth of news stories and report them no matter the cost, or whether the greater responsibility is to the cause of the nation.[1017] The correspondents considered here largely recognised that they would not be able to publish everything that they

[1012] Ronald J. Nelson, "The Writing Styles of Two War Correspondents: Stephen Crane and Ernie Pyle", *Philological Papers* 51 (2004): 36.
[1013] Mick Hume, *Whose War Is It Anyway? The Dangers of the Journalism of Attachment* (London: InformInc, 1997).
[1014] Kate McLoughlin, "War in Print Journalism", 52.
[1015] Hume, *Whose War Is It Anyway?*, 18.
[1016] James Shotter, "Fact and Fiction: The Lessons of Ryszard Kapucinski", *Financial Times*, 7 Jan 2022.
[1017] Williams, "Something More Important than Truth", 156.

might want to and would be subject to censorship. There was, however, a certain naivety, particularly in the cases of Slessor, Silk and Wilmot, in underestimating the level of control that would be exerted over their work, certainly after the tightening of restrictions in New Guinea compared to the Middle East. This stemmed in part from their hopes that their journalism would make a difference and, in the process, cement their names in Australian history. Slessor, used to having his literary journalism published in full as he intended, could not stomach the 'mutilation' of his despatches, which failed to make the kind of impact that he had hoped for. Very likely he had wanted to be the 'New Bean', but he ended the war largely an irrelevant figure, bitter and frustrated.

On censorship White later noted that war correspondents 'had to accept the necessity' for it 'in a military sense' and 'in a political sense'.[1018] The 'best that you could do, as particularly in my situation as a special writer', he continued, 'was to avoid the strategic business and try to make war sort of a human experience'.[1019] This is what led him to seek out unique stories in New Guinea, finding ways in which he might be able to both witness crucial events for himself and have genuinely insightful reports published. The effect of this was to heighten his journalistic instincts to 'scoop' his peers and jealously guard the information he had gleaned through his endeavours in the field. In this sense, White and those like him were 'playing the game' endemic to the world of war reportage referred to by Johnston in *The Far Road*. As cited earlier in this thesis, Johnston writes in the novel that 'You could only be a good reporter … so long as you *believed* in the game, remained enthusiastic, continued to think there was some tingling excitement in being "on the spot", the first to see something, the first to *know*'.[1020]

This competitive element of the job was fuelled by the desire to *know* and the ambition which was so prevalent among the group considered here. Yet, despite the individualism and competition which was so engrained in the profession, Australian correspondents of the Second World War regularly operated as part of a dynamic group. So often they worked side by side in the field, sharing experiences and, when it was mutually beneficial, information. This was the case, for instance, when White, Wilmot and Parer cooperated closely with each other in New Guinea, their multimedia coverage of the campaign there amounting to the most comprehensive of all the journalistic output from the region. But even when internal tensions threatened to boil over within certain groups, as with the Department of Information Film Unit and the ABC Field Unit in the Middle East, the work produced was still very much in line with the journalistic and artistic visions of the correspondents and their employers. The correspondents were, too, also capable of working together as a group in ways which were deemed mutually beneficial and 'for the greater good'. Slessor's resignation in 1944, White's report from New Guinea, and Parer and Silk's press campaign are all evidence of this. By studying the group, therefore, we have seen how this particular selection of war correspondents thought of their work, their hopes for it, how they operated in the field, and

[1018] White interview with Jepperson, S00981, AWM.
[1019] *Ibid.*
[1020] Johnston, *The Far Road*, 49.

how they contributed to the Australian popular imagination and memory of the Second World War.

The originality of this thesis lies in its approach. By employing group biography as a means to closely analyse the lives and work of some of Australia's most notable war correspondents of the Second World War, it provides a substantial addition to the existing scholarly literature on these individuals, as well as Australian conflict reporting more generally. Rather than providing a litany of significant moments in their lives, it contextualises their work and analyses how these individuals conceptualised and set about the job, as well as the nature of their reporting and its significance more broadly. The lens of group biography has therefore, as mentioned in the introduction, provided a useful means to explore both the individuals of concern and the historical context in which they operated.

The shaping of the popular imagination of the war, as mentioned above, was particularly true of those working in modern mediums. Wilmot's broadcasts brought the voices and the sound of war across the airwaves directly into Australian homes, harnessing the power of radio, the growth of which had been meteoric in the years leading up to the war. Parer and Silk's still and motion photography provided the visual 'evidence' of the war's events, conveying an image of conflict which was up close and personal. This bolstered the Anzac mythos, but it also supplemented the written work of those like White and Johnston.

Whereas Bean was the standout individual of Australian war journalism of the First World War, the Second had thrown up a varied group of artistically accomplished correspondents. In many ways they were the heirs of Bean, working, to some extent, from the blueprint which he had laid out. Yet they also saw in war opportunity for themselves to pursue their ambitions, whether this be to witness and record events of historical significance, practice journalism amidst the excitement of battle, bolster their own reputations, or use conflict as a kind of artistic testing ground. In this way, their lives as war correspondents were somewhat contradictory—most sought out and wanted to report the 'truth', yet they were also to a considerable extent propagandists whether they liked it or not; they were genuinely interested in the events unfolding on and around the battlefield, but they also saw in them great personal opportunity.

The present-day British war correspondent Alex Thomson has stated that 'anyone who doesn't say that being a war correspondent is a glamourous way of making a living is bull-shitting … You are there at moments of history … [It] is a fantastic opportunity, purely selfishly … to be present where things are happening'.[1021] This, I think, is emblematic of the war correspondents considered here. They were to some extent seduced by the excitement and glamour of the profession, but they also wanted to bear witness and make a difference

[1021] Cited in McLaughlin, *The War Correspondent*, 20.

through their work. That ‘fleeting glimpse of truth’ mattered to them and their attempts to capture it are their legacy.

Image Credits

Figure 1: Osmar White with members of the Blue Mountaineers, c. 1929 (Blue Mountains City Library, PF 2929).

Figure 2: Osmar White climbing with Eleanor and Eric Dark and Eric Lowe on Boar's Head Rock, Katoomba, 1931 (Blue Mountains City Library, PF 2929).

Figure 3: Kenneth Slessor with other staff of *Smith's Weekly*, December 1936 (SLNSW PXE780 (v.5)/15).

Figure 4: Cartoon depicting Chester Wilmot and Alan Benjamin prior to their world debating tour, *Table Talk*, 8 July 1937 (Trove).

Figure 5: Damien Parer during his time at the Max Dupain studio, 1938 (Olive Cotton, AWM 2019.195.3).

Figure 6: George Silk at his embarkation for the Middle East, Melbourne, April 1940 (Edward Cranstone, AWM 001390/31).

Figure 7: Kenneth Slessor on the day of his departure from Sydney for Britain, 5 May 1940 (AWM 001830).

Figure 8: Australian war correspondents arriving in Alexandria from Crete, 27 April 1941 (George Silk, AWM 023807).

Figure 9: Damien Parer with George Silk, outside Tobruk, c. August 1941 (AWM 009499).

Figure 10: Members of the Department of Information Film Unit in the Middle East, 1940 (NFSA, 352412).

Figure 11: Aftermath of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh, November-December 1941 (George Silk, AWM 011854).

Figure 12: Staged image of a downed German Junker, April 1941 (Frank Hurley, AWM 007521).

Figure 13: Australian troops advancing in Lebanon, July 1941 (George Silk, AWM 008595).

Figure 14: Chester Wilmot in Palestine, 12 July 1941 (George Silk, AWM 008619).

Figure 15: Chester Wilmot recording troops singing in the Middle East, 1941 (NAA SP312/1, 3).

Figure 16: Osmar White and Chester Wilmot in New Guinea, 19 October 1942 (Damien Parer, AWM 013472).

Figure 17: "Brass-Hats Curse Chester Wilmot", *Smith's Weekly*, 13 September 1941 (Trove).

Figure 18: Thomas Blamey with Sydney Rowell, Palestine, 2 January 1941 (George Silk, AWM 004852).

Figure 19: George Silk image of dead Australian Soldier, Buna, 1 January 1943 (George Silk, AWM 014037).

Figure 20: Still from opening credits of *Sons of the Anzacs* (1943) (AWM F00188).

Figure 21: "To the Parthenon, Amongst the Pillars", March 1941 (George Silk, AWM 006787).

Figure 22: "Contrast between the Modern Australian and Ancient Greece", Mar 1941 (George Silk, AWM 006838).

Figure 23: Still from *Assault on Salamaua*, 13 July 1943 (Damien Parer, AWM 127971).

Figure 24: Raphael Oimbari assisting George 'Dick' Whittington, 25 December 1942 (George Silk, AWM 014028).

Figure 25: Still from *Assault on Salamaua*, 29 July 1943 (Damien Parer, AWM 127986).

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