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Duncan McNab is a journalist and author of four books. In a former life he was a detective in the NSW Police Force and a private investigator.

MISSION 101

**The Untold Story of the SOE and
the Second World War in Ethiopia**

DUNCAN MCNAB

The
History
Press

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Also by Duncan McNab

The Usual Suspect: The Life of Abe Saffron

The Dodger: Inside the World of Roger Rogerson

Dead Man Running (with Ross Coulthart)

Above the Law (with Ross Coulthart)

Cover image: Ken Burke (reclining) with old friends, Ted Body (behind) and Bill Howell (right), and patriot troops resting on a riverbank in Ethiopia. (*Australian War Memorial*)

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To the late Ken and Grace Burke, my
thanks for adding lashings of zest to what
would otherwise have been a fairly normal
childhood

IT HITS THE FAN

On 1 September 1939, Hitler's forces invaded Poland. Two days later, at 11.15 a.m., Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made an unprecedented live broadcast on the BBC from the Cabinet Room at Number 10 Downing Street. He told the British people, and those tuning in around the globe:

This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that, unless we hear from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.

He finished the broadcast saying, 'It is evil things we will be fighting against – brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution – and against them I am certain that right will prevail.'

Chamberlain's broadcast was followed by a broadcast from Buckingham Palace, in which King George VI told his people:

In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depths of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself. For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war. Over and over again we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies, but it has been in vain. We have been forced into a conflict, for we are called, with our allies, to meet the challenge of a principle which, if it were to prevail, would be fatal to any civilised order in the world.

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Within minutes of the declaration of war, the first air-raid sirens were heard over England. The BBC fell briefly silent. During the silence, with many Britons believing a German air raid was imminent, a BBC journalist phoned New York, telling the expectant media pack that, 'Forty-five minutes ago, air-raid sirens broke the Sabbath morning. We are now sitting comfortably underground. The all-clear signal has been sounded and we will emerge into the sunlight to see what has happened.' Luckily, the plane that prompted the sirens was a friendly one, a French aircraft whose pilot had failed to file a flight plan.

In Australia, the arrival of another war just over two decades after the alleged 'war to end all wars' was not unexpected. Churches around Australia, then enjoying a far greater patronage than they do these days, were reporting record attendances, with prayers for peace being at the forefront of the day's religious pursuits.

The Sunday papers were reporting the growing tensions surrounding the deadline of Chamberlain's ultimatum to Hitler. French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier was quoted as observing dramatically, and with an accurate glimpse of the near future, that it was a 'question of saving the world'. On a lighter note, the father of Sydneysider and soon-to-be opera sensation Joan Hammond told the *Telegraph* that his daughter was about to hit the big-time in Vienna. He said:

I am not at all worried. Joan has just signed a 12-month contract to sing at the Grand Opera House [in] Vienna. Part of her contract is free passage through Germany at any time. She could get to London if trouble started.

Luckily for Joan she was still in London, having just appeared at the Proms with Sir Thomas Beecham. Her Vienna career would be on hold for a few years. Japan, the papers assured us, had declared it would stay neutral.

On the soap boxes in Sydney's Domain – Australia's answer to London's Hyde Park Speakers' Corner – Mrs Adela Pankhurst Walsh was in full flight decrying the impending war and urging peace with Germany. She was the daughter of British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and sister of Sylvia Pankhurst, a vocal supporter of Ethiopian independence following its invasion by Italian forces almost four years earlier. Adela had emigrated to Australia in 1914 and married Tom Walsh of the Federated Seamen's Union of

Australasia. That Sunday, she was speaking on behalf of the 'Guild of the Empire', an anti-communist group she had founded, and was doing a fine job offending the sensibilities of Sydneysiders by insisting that Britain and, by association, Australia should not fight in Europe. In her mind, an anti-communist like Hitler and his cohorts was preferable as an ally, not an enemy. The crowd responded by hissing loudly. Mrs Pankhurst Walsh would end up being interned in 1942 for her advocacy of peace with Japan – not a popular move in a post-Pearl Harbor world.

By nightfall on that crisp early-spring day in 1939, most of Australia had settled in for a quiet Sunday night at home. On the menu were sandwiches made from the leftovers of the traditional Sunday roast lunch. Pubs were closed, but for those who hadn't thought to stockpile, the sly groggers that plied their trade out of discreet back doors could always be relied on for supplies. Though television had had its first public outing at that year's New York World's Fair it hadn't made it past shock-and-awe and into production. Radio with its news, serials, quizzes and music was still the Australian family's most popular form of in-home entertainment. It was at 9.15 that Sunday night that the ABC and all commercial networks interrupted their programming for a special broadcast by Prime Minister Robert Menzies.

Australia had been alerted to the declaration of war, not through the usual formal diplomatic channels, but instead by a naval signal that had been passed to Sir Frederick Shedden, then Secretary of the Department of Defence. The signal stated, 'Commence hostilities at once against Germany.' Within the hour, the Executive Council met at the Prime Minister's room in Melbourne's Commonwealth Offices. There was no doubt that the fight was on. Menzies wasted no time in talking to the Australian people.

The Prime Minister, echoing the sentiments of the King and the British Prime Minister Chamberlain – who, allowing for the time zones, had broadcast within the previous hour – told the Australian nation:

Fellow Australians, it is my melancholy duty to inform you officially that, in consequence of the persistence by Germany in her invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her and that, as a result, Australia is also at war. No harder task can fall to the lot of a democratic leader than to make such an announcement.

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The broadcast was followed at 10.14 p.m. by a proclamation of war issued in Canberra. At 11.47 p.m., all military districts were formally notified that war had begun.

Within hours special editions of newspapers had hit the late-night newsstands. In Kings Cross paper sellers were mobbed by crowds hell-bent on getting the latest news and analysis. The call to arms was underway with radio announcements recalling naval officers and sailors to their ships. Militia units, made up of civilian volunteers, were mustered for compulsory 16-day training courses.

Pattie Menzies, wife of the Prime Minister, added a woman's perspective to what was about to befall Australian families. She told the *Daily Telegraph*:

We do not know what the future holds, but I am quite confident the women of Australia will remain calm – will respond to any calls that may be made upon them just as they have responded so nobly before.

In Sydney's working-class inner-city suburb of Newtown, the *Daily Telegraph* reported a weeping Mrs S Childs commenting:

It's just like the night of the outbreak of the last war. Tonight we were sitting comfortably at home in front of the fire saying that there surely could not be another war, when the broadcast was made and Bob had to go back to his ship.

World War I was still fresh in the minds of Australians, but these raw memories did little to deter the crowds that queued outside army barracks in the cities and major towns. There was a war on and the men of Australia didn't want to be spectators.

In the lead-up to the declaration, Australia had already been on high alert. The Defence Committee had met on 24 August and, anticipating the bad news, had put forward a range of recommendations including sending a mere 44 more troops to Darwin and enlisting a local militia to keep our northern border safe, installing guns at the Port Kembla steelworks, and placing guards at infrastructure installations important to the war effort such as railway yards, wireless stations and factories. Rifles and ammunition were sent to the far-flung outposts in Port Moresby and Rabaul in Papua New Guinea. Tensions ratcheted up a notch on 1 September when

a telegram was sent from London stating, 'Precautionary stage awaited against Germany and Italy.'

The following day, the citizen militia forces were on high alert, and all military districts were ordered to man the coastal defences. With no Germans in sight, or any intelligence that they were en route to our island, it would be a long wait on the beaches. If nothing else, the public could rest a little easier for the preparations. The Japanese added further drama to the outbreak of war by changing their tune, announcing they would remain 'independent' rather than a more comforting 'neutral'. Thus our traditional enemy, Germany, was foremost in the fears of the Australian people. Nearly nine months later, Italy would join Germany, and become a fierce opponent of British, Australian and Allied forces.

Behind the bravado was a disturbing problem – Australia was not well equipped for a war either on the home front or on a far-flung battlefield. As historian Gavin Long observed:

Britain lacked military equipment, and knew that the Dominions could not fully arm their own expeditionary forces; indeed that Australia for example, was still awaiting delivery of modest orders from Britain that had been lodged four years before . . . An additional curb on plans for a possible expeditionary force was provided by the fact that army staff were acutely aware of their lack of equipment and the time it would take to acquire it.

The first Allied casualty of World War II was thought to have been British Pilot Officer John Isaac of the RAF's 600 Squadron whose Bristol Blenheim light bomber crashed into Heading Street, Hendon in North London a little under two hours after Chamberlain declared war. Unfortunately, Australia's RAAF managed a similar landmark two days later when a Wirraway – a single-engine training aircraft that was adapted to light-bomber and ground-attack work for the war – crashed while landing at Darwin at 10.30 a.m. on 5 September 1939. The plane was one of five Wirraways and an Anson being ferried to 12 Squadron in Darwin for coastal patrols. On board were Flying Officer AV Dolphin and Corporal HW Johnson. Both were killed in the crash.

It wasn't until 28 September 1939 that the first Australian serviceman died in action against Germany. At the controls of his Bristol Blenheim, and over Germany on a reconnaissance mission, was RAF

Wing Commander Ivan Cameron, at the time on loan to Britain's 1010 Squadron. Though swift and manoeuvrable, the Blenheim was no match for the Luftwaffe fighter piloted by Feldwebel Klaus Faber, who sent the Allied bomber crashing to the ground just near Kiel, a city that was home to one of the Reich's largest naval bases and key shipyards. In the years that followed, around 39 000 Australians would join Wing Commander Cameron on the roll of the dead in what Winston Churchill called 'the unnecessary war'.

For the Australians who would soon join the war, many would have their first taste of action not in Europe against Germany, but in North Africa and the Middle East, against both the Germans and the Italians. A handful of those men would fight in a critical yet little known operation in Italian-dominated Ethiopia, spearheading the first operation of what became famous later in the war as the Special Operations Executive.

2

ITCHING FOR A FIGHT

On 9 September 1939 our comrades across the Tasman upped the stakes in the race to arms by announcing the formation of a special military force of 6600 volunteers for service at home or abroad. This put enormous pressure on Robert Menzies and his government to follow suit. The *Sydney Morning Herald* on Thursday, 14 September declared, 'The outward complacency of the Federal Government actually engaged in carrying on a war is beginning to arouse more than astonishment among the Australian public.' Menzies did not appear keen to rush headlong into war despite the urging of a bloodthirsty press. He chose to remain what these days might be called 'alert not alarmed' and to keep his ill-prepared forces closer to home, particularly with the disturbing behaviour of Japan, which was flexing its muscles in China, seizing coastal territories and valuable resources that would be handy in the prosecution of a broader war.

Menzies was still hedging his bets as he responded to the media clamour the following day on his regular Friday night radio broadcast, saying:

We are at war as part of the British Empire. Our strategic position may very well change from time to time according to the alignment of the combatant nations. At present time, the prime necessity is to ensure the defence of Australia itself. But it would be wrong to assume that throughout the duration of the war our duty would be circumscribed as that . . . It may be that under some circumstances, Australian forces might be used to garrison some of the Pacific Islands, to cooperate with New Zealand, to release British troops at Singapore, or other posts around the Indian Ocean. Under other circumstances it may be practicable to send Australian forces to Europe.

He also used the broadcast to announce the creation of the 2nd AIF (Australian Imperial Force), following in the footsteps of World War I's 1st AIF – a division and auxiliary units comprising 20 000 men, made up of a brigade-strength group of around five thousand or more men from New South Wales, one from Victoria, and one from a compilation of the rest of the country. Privates and non-commissioned officers were required to be aged between 20 and 35, subalterns (officers below the rank of captain) under 30, captains under 35, majors under 40 and lieutenant colonels under 45. The volunteers would preferably be single men not in 'essential civil jobs', like those in manufacturing and transport industries.

In those early days of the war, the only problem facing the recruiters for the nation's armed services was too many volunteers. Finding 20 000 men to volunteer didn't seem a hard task; equipping them properly was another matter. It was something of a blessing for the government, many members of which recalled how the issue of conscription had divided Australia during World War I, and had been one of the motivations for Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes swapping sides and becoming prime minister in a conservative Nationalist government. Taking a softer and more politically astute route this time, unmarried men over the age of 21 who hadn't already volunteered for service were called up for three months of training with the civilian militias, and could only serve within Australia and its territories. Unlike years later in the Vietnam war era, few publicly objected to their compulsory training.

Gavin Long wrote that:

... the War Cabinet decided to inform the Dominions Office that the period needed to train the Second AIF even up to the stage where it might be possible to send units abroad for garrison duty and further training would afford a further opportunity for the international situation to clarify itself as to the possibility of the dispatch of an expeditionary force from Australia.

Menzies was slowly moving toward engagement.

The organisation responsible for the 2nd AIF was formed and called the 6th Division. Command was given to 52-year-old Major-General Thomas Blamey, a man with a distinguished military career and a penchant for scandal. During his term as Victoria's Police

Commissioner, he was almost arrested in a Melbourne brothel by his own police, who hadn't recognised their leader. The American general, Douglas MacArthur, later the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the South West Pacific, said of his Australian colleague that he was 'sensual, slothful and of doubtful moral character but a tough commander likely to shine like a power-light in an emergency. The "best of the local bunch."'

Despite early predictions of a rush to join, by mid October 1940, only 3400 men had joined up in New South Wales; disappointingly, only 1200 were from a State-wide militia that numbered 25 000. Part of the problem, according to a Mr LM Long of Goodooga in the north-west corner of New South Wales who had driven into Coonamble to enlist, was Menzies and his fence-sitting. Long said:

By this time there was a general atmosphere of unconcern, the Prime Minister's speeches telling everyone to carry on, and the decidedly 'carry-on' attitude of most people I met had its effect on me. At Walgett, when I announced I was going to enlist, the response was such that I began to imagine people looking at me with a surprised air. In Coonamble, Bob's girl had raised her eyes and said, 'But why?' I was beginning to feel half-hearted about it.

Despite the inauspicious beginning, Mr Long did enlist, and finished the war as Captain Long.

Gavin Long, the author not the aspiring soldier, wrote:

Indeed, only the most resolute or the most carefree were likely to surmount official barriers and public indifference; yet those obstructions had the effect not only of selecting a force of splendid soldiers in the making, but, when reinforced by a conviction (which seems to have been fairly general) that the people as a whole were not greatly interested in their fate, of deeply influencing the character of the force and, by accident, breeding a sense of superiority which it never lost.

Long reported one recruit as saying:

'There was, I believe, a large body of men, perhaps the majority, who were adventurers at heart but common citizens by force of circumstance, how many of us are not who saw in this call a

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glorious combination – the life of an adventurer with the duties of a citizen.

They certainly weren't in it for the money, with the average unmarried private receiving 5 shillings (50 cents) per day, which is a little under \$A70 per day these days. Oddly, the volunteer militia men were on 8 shillings per day.

Many of the adventurers and aspiring soldiers, both young and old, who had queued outside Victoria Barracks in Sydney's Paddington, and at other recruiting hubs around New South Wales, would become founding members of a new regiment, the 2/1st Field Regiment, Royal Australian Army. In his history of the regiment, *Six Years in Support*, the author Eric Haywood, who joined up on 30 October 1939 and went on to win the Military Cross, observed of the early members of the regiment:

The few among them who had fought in the First World War considered themselves to be the lucky ones who, among the thousands of veterans who tried to enlist, succeeded in convincing recruiting officers that ten years or so of their lives had never existed, instead of conveniently having been mislaid.

Haywood also observed:

They were Australians. Whatever their civilian occupation, the plans they had laid for that spring of 1939 suddenly became insignificant. They came from behind a plough, a shop counter, a factory bench, a steering-wheel, an office desk or a lectern ... The majority, however, knew nothing of war.

All would soon become 'gunners', and sport an in-depth knowledge of field guns – and later, the bitter knowledge of half a decade of war.

Volunteering for service early in October 1939 were four men who would be posted to the 2/1st Field Regiment. A little over a year later, however, they would find themselves not with their regiment on the battlefields of North Africa, but on a secret mission behind enemy lines in Ethiopia. Each of the four were in the last flush of youth. The oldest, at 33, was Sergeant Ronald Charles Wood, born on 28 April 1906 in Goulburn, New South Wales, the son of

a well-to-do auctioneer. Wood had attended Sydney's prestigious King's School, the favoured haunt of country people desiring a good education for their sons. Wood was an experienced bushman with a love of adventure that had taken him to New Guinea as a rubber planter. At the outbreak of war he was between jobs, and staying with his parents who had by then moved to the Sydney beachside suburb of Manly. He was the only man involved in a committed relationship, and had, at the time war broke out, been planning to marry, something that was put on hold by his enlistment.

Next up was John Kenneth Burke, 33 years old, born on 26 June 1906, in Newcastle, and a man who had a number of claims to fame, including a developing reputation as one of the regiment's bad boys. He preferred to be called Ken because he didn't want to be confused with his father John, with whom he didn't get on. Ken was a gifted sportsman who had been sent to St Joseph's College in Sydney, then one of Australia's most influential private Catholic schools. Though not the most committed student, he was a fine athlete, excelling in tennis, swimming and rugby. On finishing school, he slipped into the family business, then one of the largest produce merchants in Australia. Thanks to his family's wealth and his sporting prowess, he was a well-known face in the New South Wales social scene. When in Sydney, it was a day at the Randwick races, drinks at the Long Bar of the Hotel Australia in Rowe Street and then dinner, dancing and perhaps a few more drinks at those classy Martin Place society establishments, Prince's or Romano's.

Ken became well known to the broader public as a very capable rugby full-back for Newcastle's Wanderers, and later the NSW Waratahs. In 1929 he stepped into the national spotlight as full-back for the Newcastle side when they played the New Zealand All Blacks. Ken was reported as 'the hero' and his 'handling throughout was delightful, and his kicks never failed for length and hardly ever for direction. His tackling was not, perhaps, the most distinguished feature of his play, but he usually had to deal with overwhelming numbers.' His talent for dealing with overwhelming numbers would come in very handy during his army career.

He met the All Blacks again that year, this time playing for Australia. 'Burke's Great Game' was the headline, with the journalist enthusing, 'the outstanding player for Australia was certainly Burke, the fullback. He gave a flawless display right through the piece, and capped his effort with a snap field goal.' Though of average