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ANZACS

in the Middle East

Australian soldiers, their allies and the
local people in World War II

MARK JOHNSTON



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ANZACS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS, THEIR ALLIES AND THE LOCAL PEOPLE IN WORLD WAR II

By November 1939, 20 000 young Australians had volunteered to join the Second Australian Imperial Force. Spurred by a sense of adventure and duty, they set sail to countries of which they knew very little. *Anzacs in the Middle East* is a compelling exploration of the experiences of the more than 100 000 Australian soldiers who fought in the Middle East during World War II. The book examines the relationships between Australians and their allies, and how they related to the local people, including Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians.

Mark Johnston draws on extensive research to provide a new perspective on the famous campaigns at Tobruk and Alamein, as well as significant but less familiar battles at Bardia, Retimo and Damascus. Featuring first-hand accounts and stories from the front line, *Anzacs in the Middle East* discovers the true nature of the 'larrikin Australian' and is a must-read for anyone interested in Australia's military history.

Mark Johnston is Head of History at Scotch College, Melbourne, and a leading authority on the Australian Army in World War II. This book is a companion volume to his previous books, *At the Front Line* and *Fighting the Enemy*.

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PREFACE

This book is a companion to my earlier works *At the Front Line* and *Fighting the Enemy*. It concerns the way Australian soldiers, and particularly members of combat units, interacted with two categories of people. One category includes the local people they met in the Middle East and on the way there. The other comprises the allies alongside whom they fought in the Middle East. The evidence from which the book's conclusions are drawn comes mainly from the soldiers themselves, especially in their letters and diaries. In the discussion of allies, the emphasis here is not on relations between politicians and senior commanders, for these have been well covered in other works, particularly by Professor David Horner. Inevitably there is discussion of the broader picture of how, for example, Australians came to be fighting alongside New Zealanders and British troops in Greece, but the focus is how the two interacted in that country, especially at the 'sharp end'.

Most of the conclusions of this book might not surprise many readers, but on the way to reaching them most will get to know much better how Australian soldiers thought and fought alongside their allies and how they interpreted the Arabs, Jews, Greeks and others with whom they came into contact. Australians generally used the word 'natives' for the locals, and I use it interchangeably here if the soldiers did. This does not imply that I judge the people concerned as worse, or better, than any other. Nor do I judge those Australians whose comments on other nationalities I have quoted here and which today appear racist. Nearly all of the writers are dead now, and would in many cases undoubtedly have later renounced or modified those views.

I have long been a history teacher at Scotch College, one of Australia's best private schools. At times during that period, Australian teachers at Scotch have had exchange arrangements with overseas teachers. I well recall a conversation with one such teacher from England. When I asked him how he found the boys he was now teaching in Australia, he replied:

‘Astonishingly unruly.’ You will see in the following pages that British commanders came to the same conclusion about the Aussies under their command. You should be able to judge by the end of the book how fair that conclusion was.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I made my first notes for this book more than twenty years ago, when I was gathering material for my PhD. I began writing the manuscript in 2002 and, although being drawn away repeatedly to other projects, have at last finished it. I am glad I persisted. As with all of my books, I have enjoyed and valued the input of Australian veterans, whose words are the basis of this book. I owe thanks to dozens of them, but my particular gratitude goes to my old friends Charles Lemaire (ex-2/17th Battalion) and Winston Fairbrother (ex-2/10th and 2/28th Battalions). Unusually, in this book I have also asked for and been helped by British veterans, and I am very grateful that they took the time to write to me with their frank and usually positive comments on the ‘mad Aussies’. My special thanks to R.E. Dean, John M. Evans, John McManners and K.J. Tyler. I also warmly thank Terry Cole, Margaret Kerr, Sue Kirwood, Rex Langthorne, Rosie Leaver, Joan Mawson, John Mole, Narelle Sheezel, Elizabeth Thurston and Helen Turnbull for their valuable help.

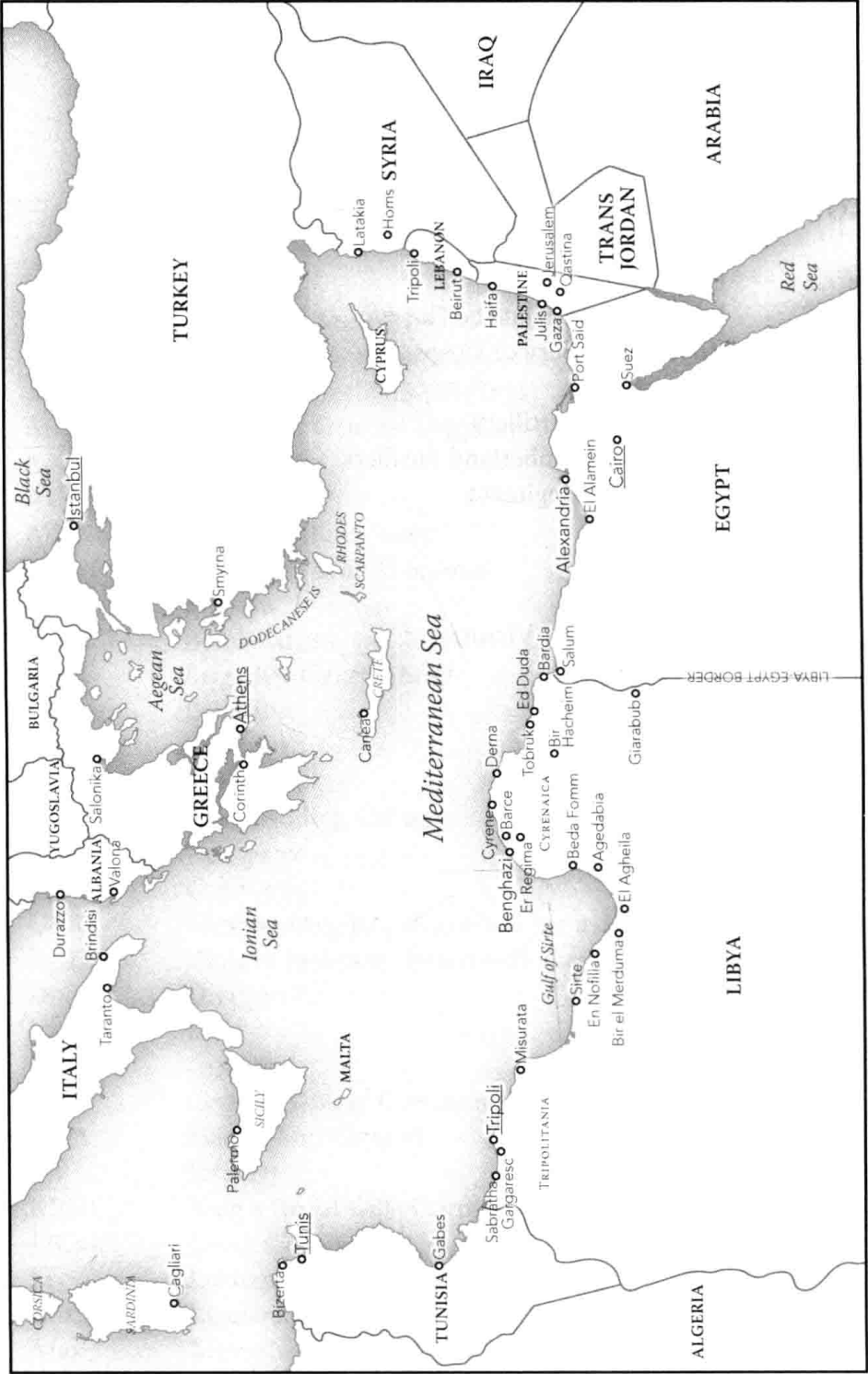
Professor David Horner, Australia’s leading expert on military matters in general and alliances in particular, offered me his usual encouragement and wise counsel. Without him, this manuscript would not have become a book. As always, too, Dr Peter Stanley has been a fount of good advice and wisdom. The content of my chapter on Alamein owes much to Peter’s research for our joint book, *Alamein: The Australian Story*. A grant from the Australian Army History Unit, headed by Roger Lee, enabled me to gather vital materials for the book from the Imperial War Museum and the National Archives in London. At Cambridge University Press, Isabella Mead was always helpful and responsive to questions. Cathryn Game was a fine copy-editor.

As always, my greatest thanks go to my precious wife and greatest ally, Deborah.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAMC	Australian Army Medical Corps
AASC	Australian Army Service Corps
AAV	Australian Archives (Victoria)
AGH	Australian General Hospital
Amb	Ambulance
AT	Anti-tank
AWL	Absent without leave
AWM	Australian War Memorial
Bde	Brigade
Bdr	Bombardier
BGS	Brigadier General Staff
Bn	Battalion
Capt	Captain
Cav	Cavalry
CO	Commanding Officer
Coy	Company
Cpl	Corporal
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery (of a division)
DADMS	Deputy Assistant Director Medical Services
Div	Division
Fd	Field
Gnr	Gunner
GOC	General Officer Commanding
HAA	Heavy Anti-Aircraft
Inf	Infantry
KRRC	King's Royal Rifle Corps
L/Cpl	Lance Corporal
Lt	Lieutenant
Lt-Col	Lieutenant-Colonel
Maj	Major
MC	Military Cross

MID	Mentioned in Despatches
MJC	Mark Johnston's collection
MM	Military Medal
MP	Military Police
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
OP	Observation Post
PRO	Public Record Office, London (now National Archives, UK)
Pte	Private
RAOC	Royal Army Ordnance Corps
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
Regt	Regiment
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RNF	Royal Northumberland Fusiliers
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
Sgt	Sergeant
Sig	Signalman
Sigs	Signals
SLV	State Library of Victoria
Spr	Sapper
S/Sgt	Staff Sergeant
VC	Victoria Cross
WO	Warrant Officer



Map I The Eastern Mediterranean

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INTRODUCTION

On the day that Great Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, Australia dutifully followed. In October and November 1939 Australia raised a 'special force' of 20 000 volunteers. There was debate about whether this force, based on the 6th Australian Infantry Division, should remain in Australia until Japan's intentions became clearer or should be sent overseas. On 28 November the government decided to send it abroad early in 1940. We need to remember that all the Australian soldiers who are discussed in this book volunteered to serve in the Australian Imperial Force of World War II (which became known as the Second AIF). The contrast between their status and that of the typical British conscript is well illustrated by an anecdote from an Australian book that tells of veteran Australian soldiers in the Middle East meeting new arrivals from Britain. According to an Australian gunner, 'a nostalgic little new-arrival' among the Tommies asked: 'Is it true all you Aussies are volunteers?' When told that it was, '... he hesitated a moment. Then he blurted out: "Blime, choom, y' must 've 'ad a fair --- of a 'ome-life!"'¹

The uncertainty about the new Second AIF's role in the war ahead ensured that only the most eager came forward to enlist. One powerful motive was a desire to be part of the tradition established by the first Australian Imperial Force, in 1914–18. The desire to escape domestic unhappiness and the urge to obtain employment were also factors, but two reasons dominate in the soldiers' own accounts. One was the desire for adventure: to test themselves as men, and to explore the world abroad. The second was a sense of duty, to Australia and to the British Empire.

The Australian official historian, Gavin Long, defines the desire for adventure largely in terms of an urge to break away from boring or unhappy civilian lives.² This is not the whole story, as the 'adventure' opened by enlistment could be less an escape from an old world than an entry into an unknown and exciting one. For the young, inexperienced, largely uneducated men that most soldiers were, overseas travel and war were not just one adventure but 'the great adventure'.³

The lure of a quest was never greater than to the war's first volunteers, but it continued to be important to those who joined the remaining three AIF infantry divisions. Thus Tim Fearnside, who joined the 9th Division, argues that 'Perhaps the call to adventure was the greatest motivation' for volunteers.⁴ However, by the time he joined, in mid-1940, attitudes towards enlistment seem to have changed. The heaviest recruiting to the AIF occurred in the three months following the German invasion of France in May 1940. The 'Phoney War' was now clearly over, and men could be certain of their 'great adventure'. Enlistments rose on other occasions with reports of fighting.

Yet opportunity was not the whole explanation: too many observers noted the seriousness and unusual maturity of the fighting soldiers among these later reinforcements. They found the cause in the recruits' sense of duty, which had supposedly been activated by wartime crises.⁵

It is hard to pin down the object of that sense of duty. Australian front-line soldiers in World War II were rarely as willing as their Great War predecessors to talk openly of patriotic duty. Hardened Australian soldiers preferred to offer trivial and fabricated reasons, or none at all, than to confess to patriotic motivation. Clearly the main object of 'patriotic duty' was Australia. However, the British Empire and Britain itself were very important, too. Australians shared a common culture with Britain. From childhood, the Australian male heard English rhymes, legends and songs. He learnt the dates of the Norman Conquest, Magna Carta, Trafalgar and Waterloo in school, and celebrated the King's birthday and a traditional English Christmas Day. The sports he played were primarily British, as were leading lights in his intellectual and spiritual life. As members of the British Empire and subjects of King George VI, Australians were consciously 'British' as well as Australian. As one perceptive analyst put it, 'even under the testing circumstances of the Second World War, [Australians] could not think of themselves as other than a British people'.⁶ Australians were officially 'British subjects' rather than 'Australian citizens'. Hence there were many points of contact for the Australian soldier when he met his British counterpart in the years ahead. There were points of difference, too, for Australian troops were conscious that differences had developed between their culture and that of the 'mother country', and they were proud of Australia.

In a large post-war survey of motivation for readiness to go to war, 'duty' emerged as the single most important factor, with the related concepts of 'Australian nationalism' and 'Empire loyalty' second and third.⁷ Soldiers rarely talked in their letters and diaries about patriotism, but an