

LANCE PETERS



THE

CIVILIAN WAR ZONE



L A N C E P E T E R S

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All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no reference is intended to any living person.

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Also by Lance Peters:

The Red-Collar Gang
The Dirty Half-Mile

For Laura, Lucinda and Luke — the loves of my life

AUTHOR'S NOTE

You can, if you wish, call this fiction, faction. For the setting, the institutions, the military procedure, the uniforms, the political manifestations and some of the incidents, are all authentic, as is the general wartime atmosphere.

Although some of the details in the book might seem rather strange to contemporary readers, they are all the result of exhaustive research and further authentication by the indelible childhood memory of a small boy who hob-nobbed with the “Yanks” on a chewing-gum level during those fateful war years. That small boy, of course, grew up to become the author of *The Civilian War Zone*.

The main characters however, with the exception of Detective Sergeant Joe Church, are fictional and entirely invented, with the customary disclaimers. The character of Joe Church has been modelled on a real police officer, whose astonishing crusade against vice, crime and corruption spanned some thirty-five years in the NSW police department. His background is sketched in much more thoroughly in my novel *The Dirty Half-Mile*, which is set in the 1930s.

I would particularly like to thank the following for their Civilian War Zone research assistance:

(Pfc) Woody Larimore, who was one of the Yanks down under in World War II; my good friend and physician Dr Debbie Saltman for her medical expertise; (Captain) Ray Cooper — Military Historical Society; Alison Hartley Lichtenstein, who knew just where to look in the Public Library when my eyes failed me; and my wife Laura, who was my eyes during that long period of near blindness (now thankfully past) whilst I was writing this novel. Doubtless this affliction added some salt to the wounded in these pages and some vitriol to my writing.

Lance Peters

“A good soldier has his heart and soul in it. When he receives an order he gets a hard-on, and when he drives his lance into the enemy’s guts, he comes.”

BERTOLT BRECHT *Mother Courage*

“Never shall our enemy set foot upon the soil of this country without having arrayed against it the whole of the manhood of this nation, with such strength and quality that this nation will remain forever the home of sons of Britishers who came here in peace in order to establish in the South Seas an outpost of the British race.”

“Without any inhibitions of any kind I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links with the United Kingdom. We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength. But we know too that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on. We are therefore determined that Australia shall not go. We shall exert our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold on until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.”

JOHN CURTIN
Prime Minister of Australia
December 1941 (after Pearl Harbor)

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P R O L O G U E

The enemy was wearing a tan shirt, olive drab trousers and jump jacket, and an olive drab garrison envelope-type cap fronted by a small eagle within a brass circle and trimmed with Air Corps colours of ultramarine and orange. He had a (US) badge pinned on his right shirt collar and an aeroplane emblem on the left, as well as wings above the fruit salad on his breast pocket. His tie was light tan and his shoes were highly polished dark tan. The two railroad-track silver bars on his shoulder sleeve indicated he was a captain.

Of course the GI didn't know the guy was the enemy. The GI wasn't the type of rebellious enlisted man who considered all officers to be enemies. This enemy was dressed, and spoke, as a compatriot. He also had a comforting smile on his round cherubic face with its almost invisible plucked eyebrows. Furthermore, he seemed to be that rarity — an officer who showed respect and friendship for a lowly private. Almost as if they were equals.

The GI was feeling pretty low, right in the middle of the depression stage of a long drunk. He'd lost his buddies and his footing. He was sitting on the pavement against a boarded-up shop window, watching the blurred passing parade of servicemen and their women, chatting gaily, frivolously, flirtatiously, and he wondered how long it would be before he next threw up or pissed in his pants.

It was raining gently — a damp spring afterthought. No umbrellas. You couldn't buy one today for love or money. Not even on the black market. The people who normally manufactured umbrellas were manufacturing guns. The GI wished it were raining beer, so he could have another drink without having to stand up.

He couldn't remember where he was for a moment. It was a city like most others. It could have been Baltimore or Boston Massatwoshits. He could never pronounce that properly even when he was sober. No, he was down under. In more ways than one. Somewhere called King's Bloody Cross, so some local told him. Two- and three-storey buildings closing in on him, bigger apartment buildings, restaurants with rationed apologies for food, nightclubs that forced you to drink until dawn and then kicked you out when they'd taken all your dough. Wasn't it amazing what life did to you. Only an hour ago he'd been able to stand up of

his own free will. Now, he had no free will.

This kindly army air force officer was the first not to ignore him. The first one to stop. He asked him if he needed help, a hand up, a friendly shoulder, anything.

Of course he needed help. Anyone could see that. He was sick, pissed as a fart, having been one full day stinko on a two-day pass. And now he couldn't stand up, not for anything; not for the MPs, not for Rita Hayworth, not even for "The Star-spangled Banner".

The enemy, the benevolent, poolball-faced enemy, helped him up. He even guided him down the street with a supporting arm and a reassuring phrase.

"Take it easy, soldier. We'll look after you. That's our duty."

The enemy certainly looked after him. He took him to "headquarters". Headquarters? That's what he told him it was. But it looked more like an ordinary old house. A suburban bungalow. Not surprising. The US military command had taken over hotels, guesthouses, warehouses, mansions, churches, office buildings, apartments, even a huge underground tunnel built for the never-completed Eastern Suburbs Railway — all for personnel use. So headquarters was a bungalow? Not inconceivable. And inside it was stuffed with all sorts of military bric-a-brac.

The brew-addled GI was not really capable of disputing anything, least of all with such a friendly enemy. After helping the GI remove his uniform in the "officers' quarters" the captain proceeded to ply him with black coffee, sponged his face and neck with a cool flannel and applied iodine and Zambuck to his cuts and scratches.

The GI wondered why he had had his uniform removed, and then put it down to the fact that he was going to be given a nice comfortable bed to sleep in. All part of the R and R. Rest and regurgitation? No. That didn't sound right either. Still, it was no worse than Massatwoshits.

He also wondered why the kindly captain removed one of his dog tags and read it aloud.

"Anthony Costanzi. Type O. Tetanus 5-16-42. Gk. Orth. N.o.K. — Gina Costanzi, Greenboro, N.C."

"Is that your wife?" the captain asked.

“My ma. Hi ma!” Giggles.

“You not married, soldier?”

“Hell no. I’m just a kid.”

Costanzi did vaguely wonder why an officer would go to such lengths to help a vomitously shickered enlisted man.

Don’t look a gift-horse’s ass in the mouth, he thought, and that thought too joined the others in semi-oblivion.

The captain, who was quite a few inches shorter than the GI, and at least fifteen years older, in his late thirties, asked a few more personal questions.

“Do you have a girlfriend, soldier?”

Costanzi held up three fingers. “Two,” he said. “Both of ’em North Carolina gals. From North Carolina. An’ I’m gonna marry one of ’em one day. But I ain’t sure which. Mary with the big boobs or Sarah with the big boobs? Whatta you think. Sir? It’s a very confusing shituation. Whatta you think. Sir? I’m only a kid.”

Oddly, the captain didn’t answer the question. He obviously heard him. He was listening intently, with his round head cocked to one side, but he showed no emotional reaction.

“What do you think of the Aussie girls?” the captain asked, advancing the conversation.

“I think . . .” Costanzi answered, “I think . . . there’s lots of ’em. All over the place. That’s what I think. Sir. Whatta you think?”

“What’s your outfit, soldier?”

Costanzi pondered, waiting for the fog to clear. Then he saluted. “Signal Corps. Thirty-Second Infantry. Sir! Red Arrow. Sir! And I love the army. Sir! Beats the hell out of topping tobacco plants. Sir!” Grinned. “Sir!” Foggy again. So grateful to be made so comfortable. “You’re my favourite officer, sir. I’d give you a purple heart, if I had one.”

The tall, too trusting, dark-haired young GI was nearly unconscious when the enemy helped him onto a bunk and gently eased him over onto his front. He thought it was just the booze and fatigue. He didn’t know there was a gram of chloral hydrate and sixteen fluid drachms of whisky in the black coffee, which constituted a swift Mickey Finn. He had actually liked the black coffee. The best-tasting drink he’d had all night.

*Every night and every morn,
Some to misery are born.
Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to endless night. . .*

the enemy gently recited.

The last thing Costanzi ever heard was the enemy starting to breathe heavily. Not from passion, but a kind of asthmatic heavy breathing — the last gasp of a coal miner with silicosis.

In his mental blear and terminal state of unreality, the GI felt sorry for the pulmonary enemy. He wanted to help him. One good turn deserved another.

His last wish was granted.

When the enemy produced an M1 carbine bayonet and plunged it into the base of Costanzi's skull, behind the left ear, it was a great help. The satisfaction involved was cathartic. For the enemy. Only seconds after, as the GI expired from the severing of the auricular branch of his jugular and the ripping of his medulla oblongata, where the spinal cord became the lowest part of his brain, the enemy's breathing returned to normal. Sweet lung reflation. It made him smile again. Proud of his skill. Minimal blood flow. Almost clean as a whistle. Practice made perfect.

Then came the next phase — stuffing the GI's second dog tag in his mouth and stripping his uniform of insignias, valuables and personal effects, including the excessive US army pay. This turned out to be a disappointment. The sly grog merchants must have got their greedy hands on most of it. Didn't matter. It wasn't the money but the glory. His valuable contribution to the war effort. So he thanked his lucky stars and stripes and carved off the GI's pinky for his war souvenir collection. Then he called in his warrant officer and master sergeant to handle the disposal of the remains.

Finally he stood immaculately to attention, saluted and held two minutes silence, for the fallen.

"God save the king," he breathed.