ON DANGEROUS GROUND
A GALLIPOLI STORY
BRUCE SCATES
To the memory of my Grandfather,
Pte Thomas Charles Scates, Quinn’s Post, 1915,
and for Ken Inglis, who taught us how to remember Anzac.
One

Beginnings
the bloody grind of battle...

Lemnos, en route to Gallipoli, 1919

I dig my hands deep into my greatcoat pockets, stretch out my frozen fingers and fill the muffled spaces. For a moment I let them linger before sinking them into well-worn corners. Searching. Then, in a quick, clean and much-rehearsed action, I clutch my pipe and lift it to my mouth, biting down on ebony. Instantly the taste is on my tongue. Dry breath and moist tobacco. A match strikes red in the morning light. The first curls of smoke billow up around me. The smell from the ember is warm, comforting, familiar.

I look out across the water to the smudge of hills on the horizon. Even from my distant hut on the isle of Lemnos, the landscape of Gallipoli is unmistakable. My eyes run down gullies like a finger on a map. I trace sharp ridges plunging to the sea, plot the course of broken ravines, scan the buckled shoreline. I steel my face against the wind and wonder where the trenches had cut across the hills, guess which of the heights gave Turkish gunners the best reach of the beaches. The landing seems a lifetime ago now. And yet it feels as real and as close as if it were yesterday. In the half-light, memories surge across the water. How strange to feel so homesick for Anzac.

A shadow appears followed by a voice.
‘That you, Charley?’

My companion has appeared from nowhere. Four years of soldiering have refined the art of ambush. Harry Vickers smiles, aware he’s startled me and clearly rather proud of it. He moves in a little closer, draws a cigarette from a crumpled packet and fumbles for his lighter.
'Here,' I say, more to regain my composure than anything else, 'save yourself the flint, Harry.' I cradle my hand around the flame and move it up towards him. For a moment I study the young man's face, its lines deep and furrowed like those trenches on the ridgelines. Vickers seems so much older than he is. Like that swelling sea, there is a restlessness about him. And a hurt as deep as any ocean.

The wind strengthens suddenly and we’re pushed against the wall of the hut. It creaks as the weatherboard bends against our backs. Vickers shifts the weight of his body from one foot to the other. I know there’s a pellet of Flanders shrapnel still lodged in his thigh; I can feel the cold morning air twisting its jagged edge. But Vickers says nothing. We both stare hard at the water and know what the other is thinking.

Perhaps it’s because historians are never really comfortable with silence that I am the first to speak. My words are measured, precise, the same words I’ve chosen to begin a thousand conversations, conducted over a hundred campaigns, a careful record of the most careless kind of carnage.

‘You were there from the first weren’t you, Harry?’

A seasoned collector of words, a trader in memory, I know the first question matters most. It decides the fate of an interview, especially with men fresh from fighting. By now, I thought I’d found the perfect formula. A phrase that signalled trust, invited dialogue. But Gallipoli could still surprise me.

‘So were you, Charley.’

Vickers looks straight ahead, staring spellbound at the water. There is no need to say anything more. A gull wrestling with the wind careers above us before plunging like a dead weight into foaming madness, flight and form extinguished in an instant.

A sheet of rain runs fast across the sea. It lashes the water and races towards us. Spray stings my eyes. Salt rubs into them.

‘It’s cutting up rough – best go back in, eh?’

I nod and, as we turn to go inside, steal one last hurried glance at what we always knew as Anzac.
The door of the hut creaks loudly to a close. It rouses George Lambert from what had once passed as a sofa. He stretches and blinks at the light now streaming in through the window. The surge of wind has pulled a curtain to one side revealing the room and its only occupant in all their shabby intimacy. My eyes scan the clutter that attends every artist: a costume thrown carelessly over a chair, a vase of dried flowers, pots of drying paint, a teetering pile of books on the floor, any number of empty wine bottles. Lambert is dressed in his usual bohemian excess: a bright mauve scarf, loose collared shirt and a wide-cuffed gown fashioned from brocade and velvet. The colours collide with the dull khaki of our greatcoats. Enamoured as he is of men in uniform, George is a creature of outrageous individuality.

‘Wondered when you blokes would have had enough. Getting a bit fresh out there is it? Here…’ Lambert thrusts a small flask towards us. Its silver sheen flashes in the winter sunlight. ‘This might just warm you up a bit.’

‘Really, George, it’s a bit early isn’t it?’

Lambert pulls the flask away as quickly as he’d offered it. ‘Please yourself, Vickers.’ He clears his throat. His cough sounds like clag shaking in a bottle. ‘What about you, Charley? Last of the cognac, you know, last of the good stuff.’

I knew it well enough. The honey-sweet smell of liquor was all too familiar in this particular company. I watch the artist’s hand moving to and fro with the flask, like a brush sweeping across a canvas. Lambert seemed to have the shakes this morning. Of course it could be the cold, but it was more likely the aftermath of last night’s fierce revelry, launching into poetry and song, spraying spittle into candlelight, through to the wee hours.

‘Hair of the dog, Charley?’

I knew Lambert thought I was something of a wowser. There is no word more hateful in a digger’s vocabulary. Perhaps for that reason I wanted to prove him wrong. Perhaps because drinking didn’t seem such a sin any more or perhaps it was just Lambert’s wink – wicked and irresistible.
ON DANGEROUS GROUND

‘All right, George,’ I enjoy my little rebellion, ‘just a snifter.’

I pull a chair to Lambert’s side and sink down beside him. The room seems suddenly smaller than it was – warm and close as if the walls themselves remembered conversations. We’d been together several weeks now. The adventures of our journey and a common distance from home had made us somehow inseparable. I’d come to think of Lambert and Vickers as an old married couple. The two men feuded and forgave with relentless regularity.

As always it was Lambert who struck up a conversation. Enamoured of his own lyrical, sing-song words – hungry for companionship.

‘Good to share a dram, eh Charley? We artists must stick together and drink together I say.’ He leans across the sofa and we manage a clumsy clink of glasses. Then, as is so often the case, Lambert’s tone changes. ‘But I’ve been wondering about you Charley Bean – are you really an artist at all? I mean, is your history art – that long and weary road trodden by all who would attain true greatness? Or is it…’ Lambert strokes his ginger beard as he searches for the right word, ‘…is it some sort of science?’

The last word reaches me as the first sip of cognac singes my throat. ‘Science,’ he snarles again, spittle settling on his goatee, ‘that drab thing much beloved of engineers and…’ Lambert pauses and considers all the vocations inimical to artists, ‘…accountants! Yes, that is a deep question for you, Skipper. Here! Take a second sip to consider it.’ The artist leans again across the sofa, tilting the flask at a perilous angle.

Vickers raises his eyebrows. ‘Charley had better keep a clear head for that one.’

Lambert frowns. It troubles him that one so young can speak so responsibly.

‘Oh Vickers, really – do keep out of it. Artists, historians and drinkers only.’

‘Really?’ Vickers snaps in reply. ‘Not even officers?’

We both knew why he’d said that. Neither Lambert nor I were soldiers, let alone officers. We had served in what the army
called an ‘ancillary’ role. I’d been a correspondent for the papers back home, Lambert a war artist in Palestine. Modern-day camp travellers spared the sharp end of battle. Weapons in a propaganda war fought far from the grubby world of the trenches. Even so, we’d both seen our share of fighting. Through sun-drenched summers Lambert had followed the Light Horse across the Holy Land: watched cavalry charge against the guns of Beersheba, seen men and their mounts collapse down to the dust, walked like crusaders of old through the streets of Damascus and Jerusalem. My war began in the deserts of Egypt and ended in the bogs of Flanders. From Anzac to Amiens, the thud of my typewriter as relentless as gunfire. So Lambert and I knew what war did to men, knew its dark ways and terrible secrets. It was easy enough to choose a ‘subject’ after a battle. Survivors who sat for hours, dull, sullen and speechless. As artists, we’d tried to capture that haunted look in their eyes, to scratch that queer chill into print or palette. Perhaps it was just as well we never quite succeeded.

‘You can’t pull rank with me, Captain. Don’t think that for a moment. Well, Charley, what’s it to be – art or science? Can you truly recover the past? Or is history only something you imagine?’ He slides forward, his tone suddenly contemplative, as if unravelling a riddle. ‘Is there in fact, a wrong way of remembering. Please…’ the artist’s eyes sparkle, ‘enlighten us!’

‘Are you serious?’ I ask.

‘Quite.’

‘And you’ll remember what I tell you?’

‘Really, old boy, I’m not that far gone. I’m like Vickers here – a man who values a clear head for the great deeds of the morrow. The morrow, Vickers. On the morrow we walk the Elysian fields of Anzac.’ Lambert raises his hand in a mock salute.

Vickers shrugs and moves away towards a window. ‘You’re laying it on a bit thick aren’t you, George?’ He stares through the frosty pane and watches figures wrestling in the storm outside, a group of men dragging a tarpaulin over our supplies, the wind tearing canvas from their fingers.

7
I consider him a moment as he stands there by the window – a silhouette framed by curtain and sunshine. For him, I know, returning to the peninsula isn’t a matter of art or history. As a veteran of the campaign it honours a promise. A vow shouted at the sea as the last boats pulled away from Anzac; to those circles of stone dug deep into the clay, biscuit boxes shaped into makeshift crosses, old kerosene tins scratched with a name and a message, those loved and lonely graves lining the Aegean. Like most survivors, Vickers and his men have never forgiven themselves. For them, going back was as much a penance as a pilgrimage. And for me also.

“‘A bit thick’ indeed!” for Lambert, art was as sacred as any cemetery. ‘We sleep and sup with philistines. Tell us Charley, is there greatness in the canvas of history…’ he sips now directly from the flask ‘…and how might a fellow like Vickers here divine it?’

Vickers and I exchange a glance. Both of us had tired of this conversation even before it began. The more Lambert drank, the more weighty and worthless the allusions. I’d known the type from my college days at Oxford. Wordy youths who read poetry, talked politics, recited verses from the classics and drank themselves into oblivion. I’d never had much time for them. But Lambert, I had to admit, was different. A great heart was hidden behind that theatricality and bluster. And truth was, we’d come to tolerate, even enjoy, his excesses.

‘First and foremost it’s my job to get things right, George. Not to exaggerate, not to romanticise, simply to record. It’s our responsibility to future generations.’

“‘Get it right’?” Vickers swings away from the window and plunges suddenly towards us. His hand is raised slightly in the air, as if he is clutching his question. ‘Did we ever “get it right” at Gallipoli, Charley? Nothing went right there, did it?’

‘I didn’t say that, Harry. But it’s the job of a historian to explain why we failed – that’s our most important duty. And…’ I lower my voice and mumble a line from Herodotus into my brandy, ‘...“to preserve from decay the remembrance of what men have done”, give them “their due meed of glory”.’
Lambert nods darkly in agreement. Duty was a word we both knew the meaning of. But I regret the words as I speak them. From the hour of the landing to the last day of the campaign, classical allusion had ransacked the memory of Gallipoli. Modern-day battles had been fought in the shadow of Troy and on the shores of the Aegean, the most archaic language used to describe the most industrialised killing. I take another mouthful of my brandy. This time it almost chokes me.

‘Failed?’ Vickers spits out the words as if they hurt him. ‘My men never failed me. It’s the generals who failed us, Charley – Australian generals, British, French – the whole bloody lot of them.’

Lambert rolls his eyes. ‘For God’s sake, man, don’t start that again.’ It was as if naming the butchery was some sort of social indiscretion. ‘Listening to you, you’d think England was our enemy.’

‘Over eight thousand we lost at Anzac, over eight thousand. And how many thousands more in France, Palestine, Belgium? Sixty thousand dead. How much blood is that? How much blood, eh, Lambert?’ He stops a moment by the window. ‘The French had a name for it, you know, la boucherie, the butcher’s shop. We didn’t fight a war, we were le, le-le-…’

When he became emotional Vickers was inclined to stutter. ‘…led like lambs to the slaughter,’ Lambert interjects. ‘Yes, yes, we’ve heard all that before, Harry. But don’t you do those men an injustice? They volunteered after all, every man jack of them, volunteered to fight for the Empire.’

Harry, too, had heard it all before. The lies old men told to send young men to war. For him the mother country was just another harlot now. She had crucified her children.

‘Do you know what it was like to die for England, Lambert? To k-kill for England? You’d have to have been there to know what it was like. I tell you, there was nothing high and noble, no “meed of glory”. It was all just so bloody s-sordid.’

Lambert and I both look away. The words are spoken as if they could wound us.
‘Men sh—shat themselves you know,’ Vickers lowers his head like a child admitting guilt, ‘before we went over, they—they shat themselves like babies.’

For a moment no one speaks. A silence falls on the room, an emptiness that follows any battle.

‘It was hard, Harry, I know, very hard,’ Lambert looks deep into his glass and searches there for honest words, ‘but it was a just cause, after all, you kept the world free—free from Prussian tyranny.’

I watch the pain welling in Vickers’ eyes. His face begins to quiver like jelly.

‘For God’s sake, Lambert, we weren’t even fighting Germans here, jus—just poor bloody Turks, half-starved peasants and f—f—fisherman.’

And there the conversation halts. The wind pounds on the glass and rattles the window frames, prowling around outside, howling for a resumption of hostilities. Lambert stares with disappointment into his glass. He seems alarmed it has drunk itself empty.

I take the chance to slip away. I walk without a word to a far corner of the hut, as the old antagonists settle down to their thoughts. There is a small desk sheltered by a barricade of stores and cases. I sit myself carefully down, fearing sudden movement would wake dragons from their slumber.

The light shines through a window above me. It dapples gold and shadow across the dirty white of parchment. I close my eyes for a moment, brace myself like a diver preparing for the plunge, then pull gently but firmly on the thick pink ribbon that binds the files together. The papers spring open and fold out like a concertina, arranging themselves (as some far away office clerk had hoped) neatly on the table. The red seal of the Australian Commonwealth immediately catches my eye. Beneath it lies a stern injunction typed slowly and emphatically: most secret.

I know what the papers will say even before I read them. These are our instructions. The reason we have come here. Three
months after the war had ended, four years after the landing, soldier, historian and artist have been sent back to Anzac. Our task is to walk the shore where our men had leapt into battle, sketch and study the site, bring home any relics of historical importance. Back home in Australia, they call us the ‘Gallipoli mission’, a phrase at once religious and profane, sacred and military.

‘Relics’ not ‘artefacts’. The choice of words on every page is sober and deliberate. Fragments of Lone Pine, rusting 303 rifles, even the landing craft that rowed troops ashore, all have a ‘sacred significance’. I run my finger across the phrase. Sacred. A word clerks had stolen from saints, a prayer folded in office foolscape. For a moment, I find myself remembering rambling Sunday sermons, tales country parsons told to children, stories of crusades, holy grails, knightly errands. Then a voice, the same voice.

‘What is it, Charley? Something we need to know about?’

Vickers has again appeared from nowhere. I’m startled and not a little nervous. His noisy curiosity risks rousing a dozing Lambert.

‘Not really,’ I whisper, ‘just copies of cables.’

But they were not just cables at all. I have seen diplomatic exchanges before and I know these come from the highest level. Folio after folio, purple ink and broken phrases, straddling the chain of command that links the British Empire.

LT GOODYEAR OFFICER COMMANDING IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES UNIT DARDANELLES TO BRITISH EMBASSY CONSTANTINOPLE STOP BRITISH CONSUL TO PERMANENT UNDERSECRETARY FOREIGN OFFICE LONDON STOP FOREIGN OFFICE TO HIGH COMMISSIONER, AUSTRALIA HOUSE STOP AUSTRALIA HOUSE TO FEDERAL CAPITAL MELBOURNE.

And in each file, the message rings out, anxious and insistent.

CEMETERIES IN WORST POSSIBLE CONDITION STOP ALL WOODEN CROSSES REMOVED STOP ALL BRITISH AND FRENCH GRAVES CAPE HELLES SYSTEMATICALLY DESECRATED STOP GRAVES HAVE BEEN OPENED STOP SKELETONS EXHUMED STOP AWAIT INSTRUCTION.
‘Chr-Christ, Charley,’ I can feel Vickers’ gaze sweeping up the words behind me. ‘Desecration – our graves – at Anzac? – Christ.’

I fold the file into itself. ‘No need for blasphemy, Harry.’

‘And what would you call that, Charley?’

We both look down at the papers piled on the desk. I know the poor lad’s heart is racing. ‘Try to keep calm, Harry. There may be, must be some explanation.’

‘I just can’t believe it – not of the T-Turks.’

Lambert’s body turns uneasily on the sofa. My voice falls again to a whisper.

‘The prime minister has asked us to investigate – send a report back to Melbourne. He asks for the utmost secrecy.’

Vickers groans.

‘Secrecy? What the hell for? People are tired of damned secrets.’ A whisper sharpens to a snarl, ‘We’re not at war now, are we? And don’t you think people have a right to know? Jesus, they were our mates, Charley, we kn-knew these men.’

I straighten up in my chair and turn around to face him. Keep your head, I remind myself, when all about are losing theirs. Control was what mattered. Discipline not emotion. Gallipoli had taught me that much.

‘Yes, Harry, yes, and we need to find out what happened to them. But there is no point in, as I say, jumping to conclusions.’

Vickers draws a deep breath and sighs it out loudly. Like an engine letting off steam, hissing, fuming at a station. ‘Honestly, Charley, sometimes you sound like an old woman. Where’s that bloody brandy?’ And all spat out without so much as a stumble.

Harry Vickers wanders away. He walks like a blind man, towards a bottle standing sentry at the sofa. I seal the cables securely in their envelope. One pile of papers remains, each letter written by the same hand, all bearing an Australian stamp, all crossed with the unlikely watermark: Central Tilba, NSW. ‘Elsie Forrest,’ I mumble. ‘Poor, dear Elsie.’
The taxi skidded to a standstill outside Defence HQ. It was early morning but Canberra’s temperature had already soared to the high 30s. As he stepped onto the pavement, Dr Mark Troy studied the black tyre marks melting in the bitumen. He had torn his tie loose from his shirt. A woollen suit, purchased in a Melbourne winter, clung to his body.

‘It’s gunna be a scorcher, they reckon.’ In every city in the world, taxi drivers have a talent for stating the obvious.

Mark glanced over the bonnet as he collected the requisite receipt from the driver. A mob of eastern greys stared back across the shimmering heat, mystified by yet another arrival. Behind them the Campbell Park offices stretched up into the bush, defending Australia to the complete indifference of its wildlife. The same cluster of flagpoles that decorates every defence department building stood before it. All their ensigns were drooping. A fragment of a Midnight Oil song rushed unexpectedly through the young man’s mind. Crazy flags from history. The taxi driver resumed his pre-programmed conversation.

‘Thanks mate…have a good one.’

‘You too.’

The roos watched the taxi jolt back up the drive before returning to the timeless chore of grazing. Mark turned towards the building. A blast of refrigerated air rushed out to greet him.

‘Just sign here, sir – name, date, rank and purpose of visit.’ The statement never varied, not even for the ‘regulars’. A folder was pushed out across the desk and Dr Troy wondered what rank he could possibly aspire to.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that, sir.’ Having trained long ago for war, the security guard sensed hesitation in an instant, ‘…or just put civilian.’

BEGINNINGS

Campbell Park Offices, Department of Defence, Canberra, 2015
ON DANGEROUS GROUND

Mark noted the campaign colours sewn carefully onto the blue cotton shirt. Though amply padded by several years’ retirement, this man was still every inch a soldier. ‘Civilian’ was spoken as if it was a reprimand.

‘You’ll need to wear this pass at all times.’ The guard noted an iPod cord peeping from the lapel of Mark’s jacket; it seemed obscenely white beside the heavy black material. ‘Now, who can I ring for, sir?’ there was a crispness in his voice that smacked of the drill hall.

‘Special Committee, Mr Brawley.’

‘Of course,’ the security guard glanced down and read the upside down block letters with a much-practiced accuracy, ‘DR MARK TROY.’ Naming a visitor conferred respect, suggesting civilians might actually have a purpose. ‘Here for the Inquiry then?’

‘Oh, you know about that?’

‘Not much we don’t know about, sir,’ the security guard reached for the telephone. ‘Mr Brawley’s secretary will be down shortly. Take a seat, won’t you.’

Part order, part request, there was nothing in the old soldier’s tone to suggest welcome or hostility. Mark caught just a fragment of the telephone conversation which followed. ‘That’s right, small bloke...late twenties maybe...glasses,’ the guard lowered his voice, ‘...bit scruffy.’

‘Thanks so much for coming, Dr Troy. Comfortable flight from Melbourne?’

‘Yes, thank you.’ Mark balanced a folder on his lap. It was stuffed with notes scribbled from another altitude.

‘Well, we shouldn’t need you here for long. It should be quite straightforward. And I expect you’re keen to get back to your writing. How’s that book coming along by the way?’

It shouldn’t have surprised Mark that Army Intelligence had done their homework. On Howard Brawley’s desk sat a pile of personnel files, CVs, security clearances, risk assessments, even
the air force record of Mark’s long dead grandfather. All of the Inquiry’s expert witnesses had been carefully vetted – the higher the security code, the deeper the trawl through family history. Brawley settled back in his chair. A big man, it barely contained the bulk of him. Brawley was aware the young man had noticed the files. Good. That was just as he’d intended. Now was the time to sound a quiet air of caution.

‘Really, this isn’t an army matter, of course.’ Brawley lowered his voice, suggesting an air of confidence. ‘The decisions will be made upstairs, by what we like to call “a higher authority”.’ Brawley enjoyed his little pun. Mark looked back blankly. Brawley became more directive. ‘Our task is to put this matter to rest, put an end to all this speculation. Both you and I know all this happened such a long time ago. There’s no point in dwelling on the past. Our concern really is the future. In many ways these allegations are just…’ Brawley paused and chose his words with care ‘…well, a little “over the top”, don’t you think?’

He smiled again, clocking up yet another metaphor.

‘And, of course, there is the matter of precedent.’ In Brawley’s world, precedent had all the authority of Papal Encyclical.

Mark looked again at the pile of papers, much ruffled and conspicuously highlighted. Scholarly dissent welled up inside him: ‘But it is an Inquiry, isn’t it? Does precedent bind us? And anyway…’ Mark’s eyes shifted to the papers again, ‘…things that happened long ago are of interest to historians. That’s how it works, really.’

_The little prick_, Brawley thought, as he smiled back benignly. He hadn’t expected that. In his experience, the more junior the witness, the less likely he was to prove difficult. He looked with carefully disguised disapproval at the young man seated opposite him. Crumpled suit, untidy hair, messy opinions. Time for a little flattery, Brawley thought. There was nothing like flattery to quell a troublesome conscience.

‘Naturally, naturally. And there’s a place for that – in books like the one you’re writing – a place for history. But you must admit
some of this is simply getting out of hand. Articles in the paper, questions in the House.’

He nodded at the window, as if Parliament had assembled in the car park beneath them.

‘You know what I mean, don’t you?’ Brawley leaned forward. The chair groaned in protest. ‘We know you’ll come to the right decision.’ He paused a moment. A wide smile ruled out further discussion.

‘Well, we had best go in then.’

Brawley rose, unsettling a pile of papers in the process. His heavy frame lumbered across the room. For a moment Mark imagined rut marks in the carpet. To the far right, framed by yet another Australian flag, lay a door marked RESTRICTED. Above the sign someone had pinned a laminated sheet.

_Inquiry into alleged mass grave at Anzac, Grid 92._

_Strictly committee members only._

Mark wondered how the dead could threaten state security.

The desk in the conference room seemed to stretch from one end of the building to the other. The committee members were seated evenly around it. Private spaces were marked out with personal formations of pen, paper and water bottle. Someone had smuggled a takeaway coffee into the room. Amidst all the office issue stationery, Starbucks blurted out its brand name.

Mark’s eyes quickly scanned the faces. A few of them he recognised instantly: archivists, museum staff and some senior academics. Beside them sat senior civil servants and a sprinkling of men in uniform. Golden braids weaved through epaulets and pips and campaign colours announced rank and status. The status of public servants was much harder to determine. Canberra’s vast bureaucracy had its own complex hierarchy, gradations of power so subtle that not even an anthropologist could fathom it. It took Mark several months’ consultancy work to conclude that the more files one carried the more junior the position. Other than that he could never really be certain.
There was one woman. She sat back from the inner circle, barricaded by stacks of telltale files, excluded from this all-too-familiar circle of male authority. Beside her, a pile of maps was scattered at random. Never before had Mark seen north facing so many different directions. A strong, clear voice interrupted his thoughts.

‘Ah, Dr Troy isn’t it? Thanks so much for joining us. I’m General Grimwade – Arthur Grimwade,’ his voice rose as if assuming command, ‘and I’ll be chairing the Inquiry.’

Mark noted Grimwade’s uniform was the most heavily braided of all. The general’s left cheek bore a birthmark an excitable imagination might mistake for a scar. His mouth brandished the clipped moustache issued to senior British officers at the turn of the last century.

‘I expect you know some of the people here. Howard Brawley from Intelligence you’ve just met of course, your colleague Professor Evatt from the ANU, and this is Vanessa Pritchard, Mr Brawley’s 2iC on secondment from Foreign Affairs.’

Military men, Mark surmised, always ordered their world in military formations. It took several more minutes to introduce the other committee members. Ministerial aides represented the various government departments housed in the dull brown office blocks that lined the manila landscape of Canberra.

‘As you can see, there are quite a number of us and perhaps that’s a measure of just how seriously this matter is taken by the government.’ The general handed a folio of papers to Dr Troy. ‘May I briefly outline our terms of reference.’

It was a rhetorical question.

The committee had been set up at the request of the prime minister. It was to investigate rumours that recent roadworks had uncovered soldiers’ remains at Gallipoli and to identify what the general called ‘problem areas’. If possible the committee was to plot a route along the ridges that didn’t disturb human remains or detract from the site’s ‘heritage value’. General Grimwade read the last phrase directly from his guidelines. To a soldier, a battlefield
ON DANGEROUS GROUND

would always be a battlefield. There was, the general reminded him, an urgency about their task. With the centenary of the landing just a few months away, access roads had to be completed as quickly as possible. And there was also an element of controversy.

Grimwade opened a file marked confidential. ‘We are all aware of how sensitive these issues are.’ His eyes settled again on the young historian. ‘The prime minister has asked that we investigate allegations of mass graves near the site of the roadworks thoroughly but discreetly. There are certain diplomatic repercussions,’ the general nodded at Brawley, ‘and the domestic political situation is also,’ he reached across ringbound folders for a politic word, ‘…difficult.’ The folder was closed and Grimwade rested his hands across it. Not a secret would slip by his watch. Canberra was a city built on confidence betrayed. But national security meant exactly that to a general.

‘Well, I think that just about covers it. Professor Evatt?’

The old professor slowly turned to Mark and winked. It was an act of wilful flippancy. For a moment, he said nothing. Evatt was too old to be hurried by anyone.

‘Ah, yes, good to see you, by the way, Mark. I was just telling these gentlemen about the search for the missing at Gallipoli. Fascinating! Tragic, yes – but fascinating. Your field really – perhaps…’ he turned to the general, ‘perhaps, we should hear from the young fellow?’

Professor Evatt’s generosity had never ceased to astound Mark. In a profession where expertise was hard won and jealously guarded, Evatt exuded amiable collegiality. It was an unshakable habit, acquired over many years of doffing hats and hosting teas at Cambridge. And the aging professor still looked something like a Cambridge don, in tweed and a buttoned-up cardigan. He wielded a gold-tipped pen that, like himself, belonged to another century.

‘The recovery of the missing at Anzac…’ Mark began to falter, as all eyes settled upon him. ‘Do you mean during the campaign, or in the 20s…and, of course, earlier than that there was the historian C. E. W. Bean’s mission?’
There was a rumbling in the ranks. Mark wondered if he’d spoken too loudly, too quickly, too emphatically.

‘Mission, what mission was that?’ one of the brigadiers sprang into action. Missions were for soldiers, cosy sabbaticals for historians.

‘Protocol requires us to hear the young man out, Jim.’ The general called for order.

Mark was visibly nervous. Amidst the smart suits and tailored uniforms he felt small and drab and unimpressive. It was not just youth or appearance that placed him at a disadvantage. Mark shared the crippling doubts of many a fledgling academic. The fear that he was somehow an impostor. This was his first address to the committee and probably his only chance to gain their confidence. He stumbled into a speech rehearsed time and time again en route to Canberra.

‘In essence, the Gallipoli Mission, led by Bean, was a fact-finding mission for the government of the day. It was intended to investigate rumours that Allied graves were desecrated, particularly at Anzac, and to suggest ways of safeguarding our cemeteries there and help bring in the dead from the gullies and the ridges.’

To Mark’s surprise, the quiver in his voice had vanished. A few of the company jotted in their notepads, others looked back sceptically across the table. The young historian addressed Professor Evatt’s unlit pipe the way he once had in tutorials.

‘Of course, actually recovering the missing was just about impossible. Entire companies vanished in the early days – and during the August offensive. Human remains were scattered across the whole line of the fighting.’

The brigadier cleared his throat far too noisily. He knew exactly what Mark was describing.

Mark finished his speech and reached for a glass of water. He looked around the room, wondering who would be the first to challenge him. It had to be Brawley.

‘Well, we’re hardly very likely to find those “missing men” now, are we Dr Troy? And even if remains were “recovered”, as you put it, who is to say if they are Turkish or Australian?’ Howard
Brawley wasn’t the sort of man to brook interference. As far as he was concerned, Gallipoli fell squarely within his jurisdiction. ‘Let’s just put sentiment to one side for a moment.’

Sentiment, like civilian, could be spoken as a reprimand.

‘You see, for my colleague Vanessa and me,’ the young woman smiled dutifully, ‘unfounded rumours of human remains pose difficulty and expense. It’s almost a century since these men died. Is now really the time to go out looking for them?’

There was a murmur of assent across the suited section of the table. Mark noted the men in uniform sat grim and rigid. General Grimwade closed his eyes for an instant. In another war and another time, soldiers under his command might well pose a similar ‘inconvenience’ for the government. Vanessa patted her red hair carefully into place. Brawley’s flushed cheeks matched its colour perfectly.

‘I suppose, Mr Brawley, what’s at issue here is procedure.’ The old professor spoke in a slow, measured way, pronouncing each word as if it were a foreign language. ‘Government policy is to re-inter all recovered human remains. We must identify them if we can; and if not, bury them as “unknowns”. “Known unto God”, as Kipling put it.’

But Brawley’s Kipling went no further than The Jungle Book. ‘I am all too aware of government policy and we are not here to discuss that. Personally, I think we should just let the dead rest; I don’t see what good can come of exhumations. After all these years, it is not as though these remains mean anything to anyone.’

‘That’s not the point…’ Mark suddenly felt the room close in on him. He straightened his glasses hoping to signal some semblance of authority. Vanessa noted that the frame was slightly bent and the lenses fogged and grubby. ‘What needs to be remembered, what we shouldn’t forget, is that the Australian Government, indeed all the dominions, and of course the British, entered into a kind of agreement.’

‘Agreement? What agreement was that, Dr Troy?’ the general’s voice was impartial but encouraging.

‘Families were not permitted to repatriate the dead, they couldn’t bring their boys home or even build a memorial over
their graves. To compensate, the state pledged to care for their graves in perpetuity – that was precisely the phrase they used – *in perpetuity.* Brawley shuffled in his seat. ‘The state agreed to honour every man or indeed every woman with an epitaph. And to record all the names of the missing. I would argue that that agreement is no less binding now than it was in the 1920s.’

‘Oh, would you?’ Brawley exploded. The big man’s voice bellowed across the room. ‘Yes, well the government *does* maintain existing war graves, that’s why the Office of Australian War Graves is here today,’ Brawley nodded to colleagues at the far end of the table. They looked down sheepishly at their files – hoping to evade some conflict of interest. He went on regardless. ‘But what you’re suggesting, all this nonsense about recovering the dead, goes *well* beyond that. If we don’t see that there’s decent access across the whole Anzac area, and remember we’re just three months out from the centenary of the landing, there’ll be an outcry. *Maybe* it’s possible *some* bones *might* have been uncovered building a small section of the road but who’s to say if they are human?’

‘That is confirmed now, Howard.’ Vanessa’s voice, soft but precise, tempered those of the angry men growling and posturing around her.

‘Yes, but not necessarily Australian.’ Howard Brawley suddenly realised the drift of his remarks, reddened deeper and offered a swift and politic qualification. ‘I mean they could be the bones of *New Zealand* soldiers, couldn’t they – or British. And there were Indian troops who fought at Anzac – Sikhs, Muslims, God knows who else – we can’t give them a Christian burial.’

Brawley sank back into his seat, flustered by a speech that was more like an exhibition. Of course, public servants could not determine policy. That, Brawley was the first to admit, was the prerogative of government. But drafting, implementing and interpreting policy raised any number of possibilities. The policies that suited Brawley best were those that offered the best public image for the minister and the least possible paperwork for
the department. Admitting that the new access road to Anzac unearthed human remains was what the minister’s minders called a PR disaster. Damage control alone would tie up most of his staff and all of his resources.

In the opposite corner of the room, Vanessa counted the yellow flags stuck about her paperwork. Counting was her standard response to stress; the surest way she knew to maintain poise and composure. She sensed the heat of Brawley’s body and his blubber and bluster made her slightly nervous. She could almost smell the testosterone. She wondered how her boss had risen so far. How men like that acquired such power was really quite beyond her.

‘Will it be possible, gentlemen, to determine the nationality of any remains?’ the general enquired. ‘I don’t suppose much will be left of the uniforms.’

Perhaps to make a point, a gentleman was not the first to answer Grimwade.

‘Brass buttons remain, General; we can identify remains as Australian to this day in France and Belgium.’ Brawley turned to Vanessa with a look of blunt betrayal. Her next performance appraisal would be far from flattering. Vanessa visualised countless files towering around her. But continued regardless. ‘And in some cases the dog tags.’

‘Ah – identity discs won’t be much use to us at Anzac, Miss Pritchard,’ the professor’s words were muffled by a pipe lodged optimistically in his mouth. ‘Made of compressed cardboard in the early years, rotted almost as quickly as the men themselves. Rather short-sighted of the government.’ The suited men moved uneasily in their chairs as if they themselves were responsible.

‘Perhaps there’s another way.’ Again Mark felt the eyes of the panel shift towards him. ‘Parts of the peninsula are relatively stable, not so badly affected by erosion. It really depends where the remains are found. We know which units served in each sector.’

‘Yes, but at what time Dr Troy? All the units circulated. Everyone knows how confused the fighting was in the early days in particular. We need to keep this matter in perspective. And we need to
remember our timeline.’ ‘Timeline’ meant such different things for these two men. ‘January now. We have precisely ninety-seven days before 25 April. Even if work resumes on the road tomorrow, this will be a punishing schedule.’

Brawley, as always, saved the most persuasive argument till last. ‘Really gentlemen, this debate is all quite academic.’ He chose the word advisedly. ‘Look at where the roadwork is proposed.’ He waved a map triumphantly in the air. ‘The new road runs behind Lone Pine parallel to the third ridge and well out of the way of the Allied sector. If there are remains there, they are bound to be Turkish – or Arab for all we know – and until the dozers move in we won’t know if there are any…’ Brawley again chose his words carefully, ‘…substantial deposits. A bone or two doesn’t make a skeleton – let alone a graveyard.’

Laughter broke out from the far corner of the room. Brawley quietly congratulated himself. The homeliest analogies were always the most disarming. Now for the coup de grâce.

‘Ultimately of course, none of this is really our concern. The Turks build and maintain all the roads on the peninsula. This is their problem and theirs alone. You’re not suggesting we challenge Turkish sovereignty, are you, Dr Troy?’ He paused just a moment for effect. ‘I’m sure historians know what happened the last time we tried that.’

Mark looked longingly towards the window, knowing a reply now would serve no purpose. He noticed a flock of rainbow parakeets had stormed the rooftops of Nodule C, splashing riotous colour across the battleship grey of the building. He wondered if someone would be sent to remove them.

Professor Evatt looked down and folded his papers. He sighed wearily, as only an old man could, and returned his pipe carefully to his pocket.

‘Shall we adjourn for coffee, gentleman?’ Like Brawley, the general knew battles were won and lost by their timing. ‘Miss Pritchard,’ the old soldier caught the young woman’s eye, ‘do please join us.’
ON DANGEROUS GROUND

Australian Trenches facing Turkish Position at Lone Pine, August 1915

Although it was a hot afternoon, the men in the trenches shivered. They drew furtively on cigarettes, fumbled for the best grip on their rifles, gazed up at the parapet and tried not to meet the eyes of those around them. In the moment before battle each man found himself alone, wrestling a fear that welled up in his belly, measuring every shallow breath, quietly reckoning his own chances of survival. Some counted the days since they’d left home, some mumbled prayers, some struggled to remember the sound of a voice, the face of a friend, the touch of a woman. The moment before a battle lasted an eternity and it could tear men apart in an instant.

A long whine sliced the summer air. Like everyone around him, Lt Irwin knew the shell would fall nearby. Men pushed back into the trench wall, braced themselves for impact. Each shell had a name: Black Maria, cricket ball, black cat, seventy-seven. The names given to tame the terror – as if sharp metal could somehow respect intimacy.

Loud, steady, rumbling – a six-inch shell, Irwin thought. Fired by a ship’s gun, intended for Turkish trenches but a shifting sea and the sway of a broadside had sent it spinning towards them. For a second he considered the absurdity of it all, to be killed by one’s own guns just minutes before facing the enemy. But Irwin knew there was no such thing as a fair death in battle. Soldiers survived or soldiers died: for all the science of modern warfare, luck alone decided the outcome. Still, the officer inside him longed to take command.

‘Steady,’ he roared. ‘Steady men, steady.’

Tommy Lyall probably never heard the lieutenant’s words, even though he stood just a few feet away. Lyall’s nerves had simply given way, long before the bombardment began. Once, Tommy Lyall had been a sportsman – fastest across the field, first to mark and last to weary. He was the pride of a tiny country town nestled in the high country, his father’s son, his mother’s darling, one of
an army of suntanned giants Australia had offered up to Empire. Now the gunner shook like a half-drowned kitten. His body swarmed with lice, his bowels ran raw with dysentery. This was the twentieth bombardment that week and the young soldier knew the horrors closing in on him. A second before impact, he gulped down his last breath of air, and pissed the last drop of moisture from his body. A stray six-inch shell blew young Tommy’s body to pieces.

One day the commanding officer would write a letter home. Some gallant lie to ease a lifetime of grieving. But not today. Today no one really noticed Tommy Lyall's death; why note one particular death when so many others were to follow?

Irwin wiped the dust from his eyes and cried out again from the debris. ‘Ready men...we’re going over.’

As had happened so many times before, the shell that fell short was the last. Before the smoke had cleared, whistles sang out along the Allied trenches. Irwin and his men clamoured over the crumbling parapet and charged in a ragged line towards Lone Pine. The long shadows of late afternoon stretched out before them.

***

In July 1915, the commander of the Royal Naval Air Service completed his reconnaissance flight over the Anzac sector. It was a fine day, perfect for observation. Soaring summer thermals lifted his flimsy craft high into the heavens. The sound of flexing wood and flapping canvas could barely be heard above the splutter of his engine.

It was a route he’d rehearsed several times before. A bumpy take-off from the makeshift airstrip on Tenedos, a sharp turn north over battleships moored near the island, a gradual climb to 500 feet and a twenty-mile flight across the sparkling blue of the Aegean. Long before he reached Helles, the pilot could smell the trenches. Climbing to a thousand feet he pushed on to Anzac. There he had barely an hour to complete his mission. His aircraft
traced the route up Monash Valley while dust clouds rose from an army of trudging feet below. Heaving supplies to the firing line, the soliders looked up in envy and in wonder, allowed a cautious sip from their water bottles and resumed the long, hot haul to the trenches. Some blokes had it easy.

It was the trenches the commander was most interested in, theirs and ours, straddling the heights of the peninsula. Often he found it impossible to tell them apart. To discourage bombardment from the Allied fleet, the Turks had dug in no more than twenty yards from their enemy. The frontlines followed one another with jagged precision and between them ran a maze of saps, holes and ditches. Some were communication lines, some jumping off points, others collapsed earthworks where men on either side had tunnelled towards each other. At some places, the Turks’ tunnels and ours tumbled into one another. Shovels bludgeoned men to death and flimsy barricades separated one murderous band from the other. But of course, the pilot saw none of this. Only lines carved from the clay. The yellow earth glistened in the sun, a golden stream cut through the olive green of Anzac.

Weaving through the cloudless sky, the pilot traced the gullies and the ridges. Behind him an observer sketched and scribbled and photographed.

The MF11 Shorthorn soon jolted back across the airfield at Tenedos and a bevy of intelligence officers ran out to greet it. That same afternoon the cartographers began their work, plotting a zig zag of red and blue across Gallipoli’s buckled landscape. A British Army in the field needed modern maps, made by modern methods, not ruffled sheets of parchment, embroidered with curious text, scavenged from the bodies of Turkish officers. These new maps would give the Allies the advantage. Mastering the terrain was their first step to winning ground at Gallipoli. But it was what the airman hadn’t seen that mattered. From 500 feet, no one could make out the hollows where guns hid or the twisted ravines that could swallow up an army. The map of the Turkish position at Lone Pine was probably the least reliable of them all.
‘This way, men, this way, for God’s sake get over here.’ Irwin was slumped on the side of a bomb crater; his right arm, waving furiously, was all that could be seen by men coming up behind him. The ground around him was warm and smoking. In the last hour before the attack, mines had been exploded beneath no-man’s-land. Pock-marked with craters, the battlefield looked nothing like the smooth contours traced by cartographer and airman. The cries of the wounded rang out above the clatter of musketry. Irwin knew there was nothing he could do to help them.

‘Just rest a minute and I’ll get my bearings – anyone hurt?’

The men pressed in on the walls of the crater. Watching the noisy sky above. Waiting. Then a Turkish bomb tumbled in among them. Crowded into each other, there was nowhere to run. The fuse hissed and sparked, feet froze to the ground. Too frightened even to pray, men stared dumbly at eternity.

‘Baaa-stards!’ A burly sergeant, twice the age and size of his men, lowered his head and charged like a bull at the missile. He snatched it from the dust, snorted and stumbled, and flung the bomb back towards the Turkish trenches.

There was a deafening crash. Dirt and debris showered into the crater. A man’s hand landed at their feet, like a ghost sent back to haunt them. It took a second for Irwin to realise what it was. A young private laughed in disbelief. Others turned away. One man screamed and shook and sobbed uncontrollably.

The sergeant lunged again, scooped up a second missile and flung it back towards the trenches. As the clamour died down, a new cry of wounded rose up from the battlefield. Dying men, Irwin noted, sounded much the same in any uniform.

‘Which way, sir? We can’t stay here. Which way?’

Irwin crept up the side of the crater and stared long and hard across no-man’s-land. All around him he could hear the bloody grind of battle. He reached for the map folded snug in his tunic.