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978-1-107-03096-1 - 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:

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xii PREFACE

‘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.

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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.

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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 |

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ABBREVIATIONS xv

| | |
|-------|--|
| 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 |

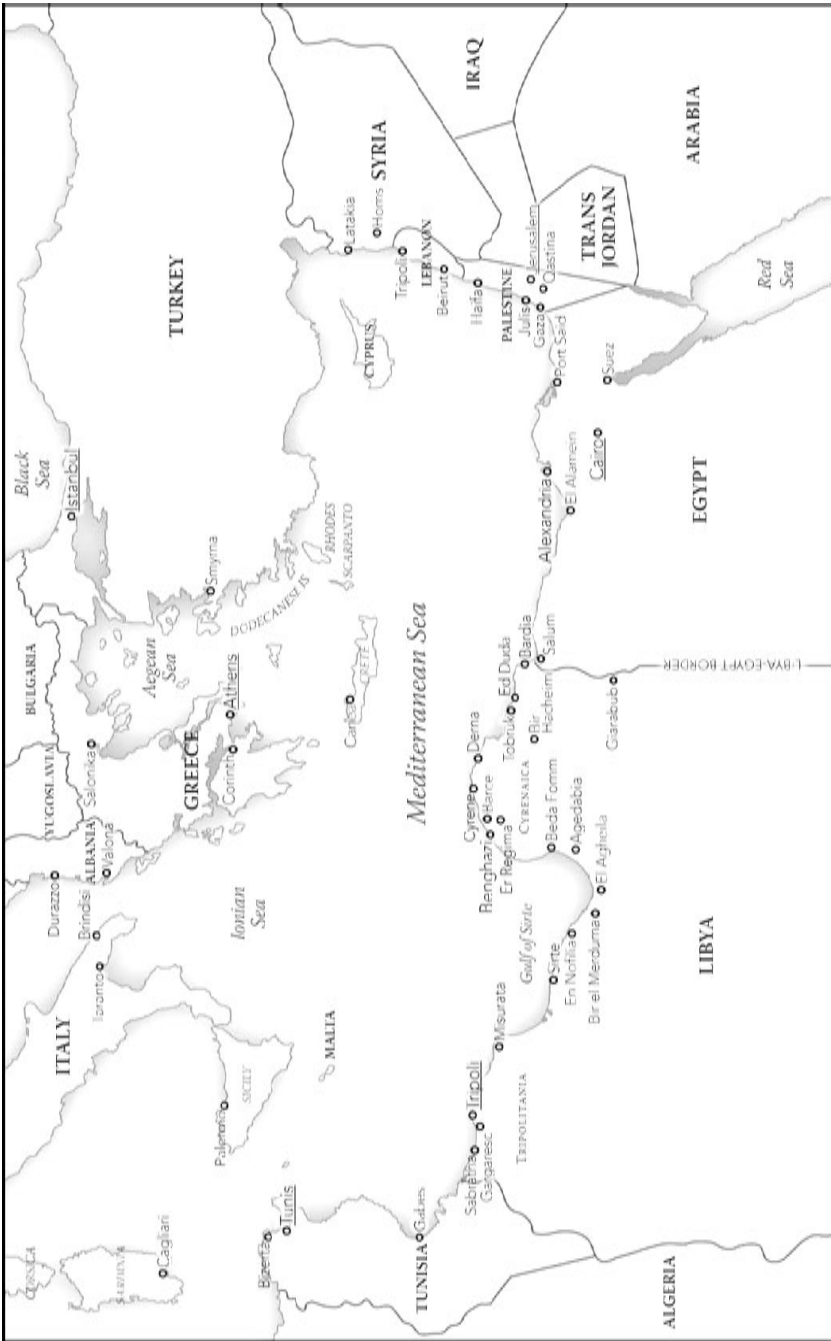
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Map 1 The Eastern Mediterranean