13 August 1940

Melbourne in August. Another chill mid-winter day in prospect. An ‘energetic depression’ moving across the Great Australian Bight. The weather forecast: ‘cold and cloudy with some further showers, but improving to chiefly fine’ — if you could believe it. With influenza and bronchitis rampant, not the kind of morning to choose for a flight to Canberra. But the newspapers on 13 August 1940 made it clear why Australia’s Army Minister Geoffrey Street, the Minister for Air James Fairbairn, and their Cabinet colleague Sir Harry Gullett had no choice. ‘ELECTION PLANS CABINET TO MEET MANY RUMOURS’, The Argus said on page one. Prime Minister Robert Menzies, in office for barely 16 months since the death of the United Australia Party (UAP) leader Joe Lyons, was conspicuously evasive about when he would face the electorate. An election was due in not more than two months and a decision could not be long delayed.

To Sir Brudenell White, Chief of the General Staff, and his liaison officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Thornthwaite, there was also a summons to brief the Prime Minister. Not about politics, but about the war raging over the British Isles and Australia’s own preparations to assist the beleaguered heartland of the Empire and meet threats nearer home. For White, the more arresting news of the day was streamed across the front page of The Argus: ‘Some of the most terrific and spectacular fighting that has occurred since the outbreak of war.’ Far away though it was, the second successive day of a German aerial offensive that would soon be known as the Battle of Britain was an alarming portent. Headlines about ‘THIRD SUCCESSIVE VICTORY GAINED BY R.A.F.’ and ‘attacks repulsed’ would not mask the peril understood by the General Staff and the War Cabinet.

There was a more worrying story for Dick Elford, the Minister for Air’s private secretary, and even more for the crew of the RAAF Lockheed Hudson aircraft on which the very important passengers were to be flown to Canberra. Since 5.00 p.m. the previous day, six of their comrades had been missing in a ‘twin-engined aircraft’ off the coast near Brisbane. As Flight Lieutenant Bob Hitchcock and Pilot Officer Dick Wiesener of No. 2 Squadron knew, the lost plane was a Hudson, just like the one they were to be flying that morning. To the pilots and the airmen chosen to accompany them, fitter Charlie Crosdale and wireless operator Jack Palmer, there were disturbingly unanswered questions. Was there something they should know about the construction or maintenance of a frontline aeroplane that had disappeared without warning or explanation?

To each of these 10 men, vastly differing in their status and responsibilities, the realities of a world at war were inescapable. A patriotically optimistic editorial writer had asked that morning: ‘Is the much-vaulted German blitzkrieg yet to begin, or is it already in progress?’ The threat of invasion to the British Isles,
the presence of German raiders in local waters, Australia’s vulnerability if Japan were to enter the conflict, the urgent need to train manpower and enhance the nation’s defences — these were the daily preoccupations of government and Service life. For Army Minister Geoff Street, there had been announcements the day before about the internment and guarding of enemy aliens, a large number of them being sent from the United Kingdom. With his advisers, Brudenell White and Frank Thornthwaite, Street had also taken note of the preparations for ‘the greatest AIF march in Australian history’ from Ingleburn to Bathurst. There was publicity too for the call-up, on Monday, August 12, of the first 1400 men — those with surnames beginning with A and B — for universal home-defence training. Some employers, under an obligation to allow men time off to enrol but not to pay them while they were absent, had docked their men half a day’s pay. The Cs and Ds were due on Tuesday morning and afternoon. The Army Minister, hopeful though not confident, said he did not believe that employers would continue to penalise men who were called up in the service of their country.

Deeply perturbing as the war was to those privy to secret cables and Service briefings, for many Australians it was still little more than a disruptive influence on what would otherwise have been business or pleasure as usual. It was arguably not Australia’s concern at all. Melbourne University’s Professor A. R. Chisholm detected a resurgence of the old theory of ‘cutting the painter’. Dismayed also by the persistent pursuit of sectional interest, the poisonous bargaining and compromise of party politics, Chisholm had a message for readers of his Argus column on August 13:

In peaceful times one could agree that if Australia is to develop a national personality she must not slavishly imitate Britain. She does not want an Oxford accent or a secondhand literature. But such independence is not incompatible with Imperial unity; and, above all, it should not be antagonistic to the Imperial instinct of self-preservation.

Yet, directly or by implication, people are proclaiming that our interests lie purely in the Pacific; that Britain’s quarrels are not ours.

To Chisholm and other alarmed observers, parochialism, persistence in peacetime work and leisure habits, and political disunity — the Labor Party had spurned overtures from the Prime Minister to create a national government — were jeopardising Australia’s safety. In Sydney, where Pilot Officer Dick Wiesener’s wife and young child remained close to Dick’s parents and her own wealthy family, plans were being made for a public demonstration in Martin Place on September 3, the first anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities with
Germany. The Governor of New South Wales and the Premier would be there to affirm the country’s determination to prosecute the war to a victorious conclusion.

It said something about a nation still secure and prosperous that men whose duty it was to understand Australia’s strategic position found it necessary to warn their seven million fellow citizens that they would soon be asked to make heavy sacrifices. As Professor Douglas Copland, the Commonwealth Prices Commissioner and economic adviser to the Prime Minister, had put it in a ‘Pleasant Sunday Afternoon’ talk at the Melbourne Central Mission, the sacrifice would not just be financial. This alone would be unwelcome news to thousands of families still suffering from the impoverishment of the Depression. Yet what had to be faced, Copland said, would be the sacrifice of ‘ideals of life, which would disturb the whole economic and social structure of the community’. It would not be long before about a quarter of Australia’s manpower would be in military uniforms or employed in munitions work. When that stage was reached, about a quarter of the national income would be devoted to the war effort. Copland did not mention the Australian Army Nursing Service on active duty; nor hint at the thousands of women now training in volunteer organisations as drivers and mechanics, signallers, despatch riders, clerks, and aerodrome ground staff.

Meanwhile newspaper and magazine social pages reported on proliferating charity concerts, funds launched to buy war planes and ambulances, appeals for tinned food, and clothing for evacuee and refugee children, and ‘comforts’ for the troops. ‘Women also Serve’ the Australian Women’s Weekly proclaimed regularly. In Sunshine, a few miles away from the RAAF base at Laverton, a week of ‘festivities to aid patriotic funds’ had just begun. There was to be a dance, a picture night, a concert, a euchre party, a massed band performance, and a debutantes’ ball. Hostesses in Melbourne and country districts had already arranged 525 house parties to raise money for Blamey House, a hostel for men on leave from the 2nd AIF. The Mothercraft Association was conducting a refreshment room at the Air Force Recruiting Depot in Brisbane. But amid the flowering of voluntary effort, the elimination of waste at home, and fund-raising entertainment, there was a hint of different contributions that might be expected in future. Mrs R. G. Menzies’ appealed on radio for support for the British YWCA: ‘Women in England are working long hours at all sorts of jobs, some big, some little, but all important.’ The Prime Minister himself announced that the Commonwealth Government was setting up a special section of the Department of Defence Co-ordination to co-ordinate voluntary offers of help in the nation’s war effort.

A nation struggling to define its proper role in a war that threatened to engulf the Pacific as it had Europe, a public increasingly bewildered by party discord when
national unity seemed an imperative...this was a time for political leadership of the highest order. In Canberra, on 13 August 1940, Robert Menzies and his ministers would assemble to try once more to determine a way forward.