10. The Brigadier: Geoff Street

No one in Australian federal politics in 1940 was more deeply rooted in the land than the Army Minister, Geoffrey Austin Street. His great-grandfather John Street, of Birtley in Surrey, had emigrated in 1822, bringing with him merino sheep from Thomas Henty’s flock at West Tarring in Sussex. Taking up property at Woodlands, Bathurst, John Street corresponded with Henty over several years as he worked to improve the breed. A century later Major Geoff Street, back in Australia after five years at war, maintained his forebear’s pastoral tradition, breeding prize Polwarths at his own Victorian property ‘Eildon’ in Lismore.

Born in Sydney on 21 January 1894, Geoff Street was the second of four children of John William Street, a prosperous city solicitor, and Mary Veronica Austin, daughter of Henry Austin, chairman of directors of the Perpetual Trustee Company. Henry Austin’s brother, Alfred, had been appointed by Lord Salisbury in 1896 to succeed Lord Tennyson as Britain’s Poet Laureate — a distinction of which the Australian family were unashamedly proud. They were happy too to acknowledge that John W. Street was for a decade in partnership with Australia’s own popular writer and poet A. B. ‘Banjo’ Patterson. Geoff had an older brother, John Austin, born in 1891 and a younger, Anthony Austin, four years his junior. A sister, Mary Veronica, was born in August 1902. John Street, probably assisted by his father’s business connections with shipping companies, went to sea at an early age, earned his master’s certificate, and joined P. & O. He served at sea throughout the 1914–18 war. After the war he joined BHP in Newcastle which had created its own small shipping fleet. With both John and Geoff in uniform, Anthony had enlisted at the age of 19 only to succumb to the influenza epidemic that swept England in the autumn of 1918.¹

Like his father and cousins, Geoff Street attended Sydney Grammar School. He was captain of the cricket 1st XI and a prefect in 1912, also representing the school at rugby ‘football’, athletics, and swimming. Among his contemporaries were Len Robson, who was to become headmaster of Shore in 1922 after a ‘good’ war and a Rhodes Scholarship; and Robert Rainy Harper, who would go on with him to university, interrupt his studies, and earn a DSO at Pozières. Street scraped through his senior examinations in December 1912 with a C in Ancient History, English, French, and Greek and a B in Latin.² Enrolled in law at Sydney University, he was more likely to be found on a sports field than in a library. He played representative cricket and hockey and competed in athletics.

² *The Sydneian*, vol. CCXV, March 1913, p.5.
His multiple office-holding in sporting clubs was an indicator of his priorities: the committee of the sports union and athletics club, treasurer of the hockey club, cricket 2nd XI selection committee. An undistinguished academic record did not reflect the exceptionally accurate memory, rapid grasp of detail, ability to marshal masses of facts, and fluency in French, admired by those who knew him well in later years. However, it was a fair return for the limited time he spent immersed in books. Compelled like all law students to take a Bachelor of Arts degree, he passed English I in December 1913, Geology, Latin and Greek I in March 1914. But when war was declared six months later he did not hesitate to abandon his studies.

Street was among a number of Sydney University law students who enlisted immediately in August 1914.3 His Sydney Grammar contemporary Wilfred Robert Dovey joined the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to fight in New Guinea, sailing away a fortnight after war was declared. Street had joined the same force on August 5. But just before embarkation, the realisation came to him, prompted by his father, that the real war was going to be fought in Europe. The first New South Wales Infantry Brigade had been formed under Colonel Henry MacLaurin, a 36-year-old Sydney lawyer. Together with Major Charles Macnaghten, a city solicitor, MacLaurin had considerable influence over the selection of company and platoon officers. The first of the brigade’s four battalions was led by Colonel Leonard Dobbin, another Sydney solicitor. Legal connections and militia experience made law graduates, and even students, prime candidates for commissions. Thus, after four days as a private in the Australian Imperial Force, 20-year-old Geoffrey Street of ‘Enniskillin’, Ithaca Road, Elizabeth Bay, was commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in Dobbin’s battalion and sailed with F Company from Sydney in the Afric on October 18.4 He had, if there was no mistake on the form, attested as a Roman Catholic.5

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3 The absence of Street’s name from an official Honour Roll of law graduates and undergraduates who served overseas suggests that, as he had not actually begun his law studies, he was not technically a law student although he was always so described in the press during his lifetime (Vernon Treatt, ‘The Law School and the War’, Sir Thomas Bavin [ed.], The Jubilee Book of the Law School of the University of Sydney 1890–1940, Sydney, 1940, p.137).

4 The 1st Battalion’s story was chronicled in The History of the First Battalion, A.I.F., 1914–1919, 1st Battalion, A.I.F., History Committee, Sydney, 1931.

5 Street had filled in the attestation form himself; and was embarked as ‘RC’ (www.awm.gov.au/collection/records/awm8/23/18/awm8-23-18-1-4.pdf).
Sydney Grammar School Prefects 1913

(The Sydneian, CCXV, March 1913, p.15, Courtesy of Sydney Grammar School)

Sydney Grammar School 1st XI 1913

(The Sydneian, CCXV, March 1913, p.14, courtesy of Sydney Grammar School)
Arriving at Alexandria early in December, Street went with his men via Cairo to Mena for training. The 1st Battalion was reorganised on a four-company basis and he became platoon commander of D company. The battalion, part of the Middle East Expeditionary Force, embarked on the transport Minnewaska on April 5 en route for Gallipoli via Lemnos. Street would recount 25 years later his vivid recollection of the extraordinary gallantry of the young Royal Navy midshipmen who were in command of the boats from which they landed. He had gone ashore at Gallipoli with his company on the morning of April 25. ‘These youngsters,’ he said, ‘showed an entire absence of fear.’ Discarding their packs, Street and his men went up Russell’s Top to a hill named Baby 700. The Australians they found already on the hill at 11.00 a.m. were barely holding their own against encircling Turks. Street’s company charged the enemy, driving them back over the top of the hill. For days they held the position. Street was wounded in the head and, ‘slight’ as the wound was, he was evacuated to Alexandria. His cousin, Laurence Street, reported home that a Major Millard whom he had met in the trenches had seen Geoff in Alexandria ‘well and cheerful’. He was back leading his men a month later. Charles Bean records that the youthful lieutenant — he had been promoted with effect from April 26 — took a party of eight men from Steele’s Post on June 4 to try to silence an enemy machine-gun position. Unexpectedly stumbling into Turkish troops in a supposedly unoccupied ‘sniper’s trench’ he had to turn back. His sergeant, the flamboyant scout Harry Freame, remained to hold off the enemy. The two men would become lifelong friends.

Before long, Street had been made acting adjutant of the 1st Battalion, with which he was to spend a rest period on Lemnos in September and October. It was perhaps at this time that he committed to memory the regimental number of every man in the battalion, a feat reported in awe many years later by Smith’s Weekly. At the beginning of November he wrote to his mother that he had just heard that ‘all our letters have been sunk accidentally!’ But there were some good tidings:

I think I told you in my last letter that my appointment as adjutant had been confirmed in Divisional Orders and further news is that I am a Captain!

Unfortunately the present GOC Aust/Div has not the same power that General Bridges had so that one has to wait until the promotion is approved in Melbourne. Still I wear the three stars & draw Captain’s pay

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7 L. W. Street to Mrs P. W. Street, 16 May 1915, Sir David Gilbert Ferguson MSS, NSW State Library, ML MSS 2858.
8 Information from the Hon. Tony Street.
9 Smith’s Weekly, 30 July 1938.
and have every privilege of the rank but although it is in Orders one has to wait till it is confirmed by letter. The only unfortunate, and really rather hard, part of it is that if one is wounded or goes sick then the rank lapses if it is not confirmed. So, as long as I am safe, I am a Captain. Nuff sed. I am sure you will be as pleased as I am and I will try hard to dodge shells & bullets.\(^\text{10}\)

Successfully dodging enemy fire for the next month, Street was evacuated to Egypt with the 1st Battalion on December 20. After a brief spell at Tel-el-Kebir and the Canal Zone, the battalion embarked for France where, after a few months, Captain Street resumed regimental duty. Within weeks he had been seconded to the 14th Infantry Brigade. During the Battle of Fromelles he was, as Staff Captain, in charge of the Brigade’s report centre. In February 1917 he was sent to Cambridge to No. 7 Staff Course. From late July 1917 to April 1918 he was seconded by Major General Talbot Hobbs for duty as brigade major to Brigadier General H. E. ‘Pompey’ Elliot’s 15th Infantry Brigade. Gallant and willing as the young officer was, Elliott found him utterly unsuitable.

There is little doubt that the volatile Elliott, careless of appearances and unguarded in speech, resented having the charming and well-connected staff officer foisted upon him. Four years later, without naming him, Elliott was to describe Street as ‘a wealthy man, who was able to shout car trips for some of the senior officers in Paris…His thoughts were always with his best girl, and he could not sleep in anything rougher than silk pyjamas at ten guineas a suit.’ Frustrated by not being permitted to appoint his own man, a socially inferior but better qualified officer, Elliott acknowledged that Street was ‘a very decent boy’ and ‘a very lovable lad’. But the ‘social butterfly’ as he would later call him, just did not seem to measure up to the job:

> I have to think of every mortal thing and suggest every single thing he does. In his spare time instead of…thinking of next day’s or next week’s work — unless he is actually doing a job of work I have set him — he goes playing bridge with the rest of my staff causing them to waste their time also…I cannot sack him and it is no use rowing with him all the time. He is only a boy after all, but I feel it very much.

By asking to be sacked himself, Elliott had in fact obtained from Brudenell White an agreement that Street could be transferred if it proved necessary. The unhappy arrangement lasted for nearly nine months. Street’s promotion as Major in the AIF and Honorary Major in the Australian Military Force came simultaneously at the beginning of October. It was April 1918, when the 15th

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10 G. A. Street to Mary Veronica Street, 19 Nov. 1915, Street MSS, courtesy the Hon. Tony Street.
Brigade had just secured the village of Bouzencourt, north of Hamel, that his chief’s patience finally ran out. The denouement is best told in the words of Elliott’s biographer:

To enable the reserve battalion, the 57th, to be less exposed to enemy shellfire, Elliott decided to move it back across the Somme to more secure billets; he directed his brigade major to arrange it and to let all the battalions know. In an aberration, however, Street’s order to the other three front-line battalions was worded as if each of them was to withdraw across the Somme as well. Fortunately they queried it, and the error was corrected. Pompey was livid: ‘trying to retreat in broad daylight over narrow pontoon bridges almost in full view of the enemy’ would have produced ‘a tremendous disaster, if not a massacre of the Brigade’, as well as creating ‘a break in the line almost 3 miles long.’ Pompey felt that his longstanding misgivings about Street’s capacity had been vindicated. Hobbs agreed that, after a mistake of such magnitude, he would have to be replaced.11

Something definite in life

After more than three years of soldiering, and having just turned 24, Street was contemplating possible futures. He had fallen in love with Evora Frances ‘Gyp’ Currie, daughter of Edwin Currie of ‘Gala’, Lismore, one of the Victorian properties in the extensive holdings accumulated by John Lang Currie.12 Evora Currie — known always as Gyp because of her free spirited gypsy childhood — had arrived in England in 1916 with her friend Esther Fairbairn and Esther’s brother Jim (bound for the Royal Flying Corps). She had been working at the Australian headquarters in Horseferry Road, at railway station canteens and, from mid-1917, as a member of a Voluntary Aid Detachment. She stayed in a hotel with her mother, who had also come in the hope of seeing her son Clive when he was on leave from the Army in France.13 Among the thousands of men warmed by Gyp’s smile there were other serious suitors, none more so than Major Jack Scott, Geoff’s distant cousin, a Sydney insurance company manager in civil life. But it was Geoff, blue-eyed, tall, and trim, who won Gyp’s heart. Keen to marry ‘his best girl’ on his next leave in May 1918, he told his mother of the uncertainty he was facing:

11 Elliott’s comments on Street in letters to his wife are quoted in Ross McMullin, Pompey Elliott, Scribe, Melbourne, 2008 (1st ed. 2000), pp.335–6, 379, 544.
I only wish I had something definite though in life. The authorities over here refuse point blank to tell me anything about the permanent Australian Forces though I believe something can be done in Australia. Dad once said that he thought he might be able to help & I wish he would try. I want to get on the A and I staff of the Australian Forces. It was very hard to write to Mr Currie for although as long as the war lasts I am alright as soon as it is over then I’m more or less stranded and without a job so to speak and no income at all. It is very hard isn’t it?14

By April 1918, with the Passchendaele offensive and the Messines sector behind him, Street returned to the 1st Battalion. He understood the reasons for his transfer but they were not something he would confide to his parents. For them the important news was the award of a Military Cross in the New Year’s Honours.15 ‘I am keeping very fit indeed,’ he would tell his mother, ‘and though a little “war worn” am still in love with soldiering and in fact find it hard to believe that there was a time that I did anything else’.16 In love with soldiering he may have been, but a different future beckoned. On June 29 in London, with his best friend Major Frank Thornthwaite at his side, he would marry Gyp Currie at St Columba’s Church of Scotland. The newly-wed couple had first met in 1912 when Gyp’s brother, Clive, was playing cricket for Melbourne Grammar against Street’s Sydney Grammar. The young ‘leg theory’ bowler, captain of the Sydney side, had left a vivid impression, taking 10 wickets in a match which Melbourne lost by an innings and 111 runs. His vivacious bride was herself a cricket devotee, her father having played for St Kilda and been president of the Victorian Country Cricket League. She was also a fine golfer, an accomplished horsewoman, and a remarkably good shot. Her sporting prowess mirrored that of her husband. Geoff Street himself, broad-shouldered, lean, arrestingy handsome in build and carriage, radiated energy and good humour.17 It was an ideal match.

Geoff Street would survive the war, wounded twice — the second time in September 1918 — but intact. After his marriage he had returned to France as OC of the 1st Battalion A Company in operations against the Hindenburg Outpost Line. In a brief biography published 44 years later, H. J. Manning summarised the ensuing months:

Rejoining the 1st Battalion at Pradelles, in Flanders, shortly after the 1st Division’s sudden turnabout from Amiens to help meet the new

14 Street to Mary Street, 27 Jan. 1918, Street MSS.
15 Brig.-Gen. C. J. Hobkirk’s recommendation spoke of his ‘excellent and capable work’ with the 14th Infantry Brigade in 1916–17: ‘The cheerful way in which he carried out his work was very helpful’ (NAA: B2455 Street Geoffrey Austin).
16 Street to Mary Street, 16 May 1918, Street MSS.
17 The Referee, 10 Nov. 1938; Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 22 Nov. 1938.
German threat, through Hazebrouck, to the Channel ports, Street was given command of ‘A’ Company. Four months later, after holding the line at Meteren and Strazeele, the 1st Division came south again to join the Australian Corps on the Somme to take part in the victorious offensive that began on 8th August. Street led his company in the fighting at Chuignolles on 23rd August, and also in the battalion’s last battle of the war at Hargicourt, on September 18th. Later that day he was wounded in the right wrist by a machine-gun bullet.18

He did not dwell on it in later years but Street had received a ‘mild’ gunshot wound that threatened to close his cricket career. The bullet passed through the middle of his right wrist. It put an immediate end to the fun he had been having with Captain Charles Kelleway, the Test all-rounder with whom he had been playing behind the lines on ‘matting’ wickets spread with hessian. Asked 20 years later by the editor of Reveille to recall ‘the circumstances of both your woundings’ he replied laconically: ‘Just happened to be in the wrong place.’19

Friends and relatives also in the wrong place were less fortunate. Of the 1796 Sydney Grammar men who would appear on the 1914–18 Honour Board in the ‘Big School’, 313 did not return.20 Geoff’s cousin, Laurence Whistler Street, two years ahead of him at school, and associate to his father, Justice Philip Whistler Street, when he enlisted, had been posted to the 3rd Battalion. He was shot and died at Gallipoli on 19 May 1915. Frederick Muir, a fellow law student who had joined as a private, was evacuated from the Peninsula in late November 1915 with wounds in the head and face; he died and was buried at sea three days later. At Pozières in July 1916, another cousin twice Geoff’s age, John Rendell Street, was severely wounded. Rather than be taken prisoner, the immobilised Street took his rifle and shot himself under the chin. It was months before his family confirmed their suspicions that the Red Cross report of a ‘fatal wound’ concealed the manner of his death.21 Humphrey Scott, yet another cousin, and a 27-year-old Lieutenant Colonel when he died in October 1917, fell to a sniper’s bullet near Polygon Wood. There was nothing unusual about these losses. Many families could tell of similar suffering. But they signified that young Geoff Street had shared to the full the war experiences and grief of his generation.

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19 Street to Mary Street, 21, 28 Sept 1918, Street MSS; Street to J. Black, 17 Dec. 1938, AWM: 43 A843.
20 Gordon Cooper (Sydney Grammar School Archivist) to CH, 12 Oct. 2011.
10. The Brigadier: Geoff Street

In Victor Trumper’s image
(Courtesy of the Hon. Tony Street)

Street’s AIF appointment was terminated on 2 August 1919. He had spent four months after the end of the war on furlough (75 days’ sick leave) but attached to General Monash’s Demobilisation and Repatriation depot in Horseferry Road. Returning from Europe, he bought a portion of his father-in-law’s Western District estate and in January 1920 settled near Lismore at a property he called ‘Eildon’. There he bred and successfully exhibited Polwarth sheep. But the life of a pastoralist was not enough to contain him. He was soon to be seen contributing to the work of local organisations such as the Lismore Agricultural and Pastoral Society and the Australian Sheep Breeders’ Association. And there was an undeniable sense that he ought to be playing a part on a bigger stage. Sport was, as it had always been, an outlet for his surplus energies. If he had any passion outside the Army, family, the land, and eventually politics, it was
cricket. He came late to golf, challenged by the fact that his wife and her brother played it so well. Eventually he got his handicap down to seven; but to those more adept he never really looked like a golfer.

Cricket was the sport Street loved. Gyp’s own interest — she even took an umpire’s course — made for a joyful bond with her husband. Unlike the portly Bob Menzies, whose appreciation of the game was from beyond the boundary, preferably in the Members’ Pavilion, Street was to play in the middle against some of the best. His wounded wrist had been substantially restored by massage and exercise. Though he could never bend it back as far as in his youth, he could still bowl the googlies that he had made his own. For six years he was in the Melbourne Cricket Club first XI playing on occasion under the great Test captain Warwick Armstrong.

In the country he turned out whenever he could with other devotees like ‘Ford’ Guthrie and Henry Bolte in the Lismore and Western Plains teams. Friends and neighbours were also likely to be caught up in his military enthusiasms. On the Reserve of Officers from 1920, he joined the AMF 4th Light Horse Regiment in 1931. Late in 1932, as Guthrie remembered, ‘he persuaded me and others to join the 4th Light Horse, which he was commanding at the time before being promoted to Brigadier’ in the 3rd Cavalry Brigade.

When still in his twenties, Major Street MC was drawn into public life, first as a member of the Hampden Shire Council on which he eventually served for 16 years. Together with his friend Frank Thornthwaite he had rallied to the side of his old chief Pompey Elliott when special constables were being enlisted to patrol the streets during the Victorian police strike in 1923. Although he was close to Ned Herring and other militia leaders associated with the League of National Security, he seems to have held aloof from the secret army organisations of those years. He was, however, an early member of the Young Nationalist Organisation that was reviving conservative political morale and fortunes. In 1929, assisted by Bob and Pattie Menzies, he had been campaign secretary for Chester Manifold in Manifold’s run for the Legislative Assembly seat of Hampden. A competent administrator, approachable, free from prejudice and snobbery, Street was president of the Hampden council in 1931–32. A reporter who first heard him in 1934 was immediately struck by the councillor’s ‘freely-flowing and flawless English’. Wherever he was called upon, at civic receptions for visiting dignitaries, at council meetings, at smoke nights, Street spoke

22 In a novel charity game in 1927, Gyp Street opened the batting for a ladies’ team, top scoring with 25 before being bowled by her husband who went on to take 6 for 3 for the losing men’s team, who wore women’s clothes and batted wrong-handed (Campderdown Chronicle, 19 Feb. 1927).
23 The Hon. A. A. (Tony) Street, interview, 24 May 1983; Sir Rutherford Guthrie to CH, 15 June 1983.
impromptu, easily, humorous, and polished. This was a man made for politics. In 1933 he was appointed a member of the Victorian Transport Regulation Board by his friend Bob Menzies. As Minister for Railways, Menzies acknowledged that Street was ‘largely responsible’ for the Board’s ‘masterly report’ into transport regulation. A year later, at the 1934 federal general election, Street took the seat of Corangamite for the United Australia Party. He had displayed reluctance and diffidence before agreeing to stand in the electorate held by the Country Party; but once elected he never looked back. Like Menzies, who moved from the state to the national political arena in the same year, he retained his seat at the next election.

There were threats before the 1937 election that the Corangamite electorate would be abolished. However, a boundary redistribution in the end favoured the sitting member. Sensitive to the concerns of his constituents, Street was diligent in attendance to his parliamentary duties, tireless in visiting local communities. He covered 60 000 miles in three years. He was quickly on record pressing for half-yearly telephone directories and more frequent mail deliveries and, with his neighbour Jim Fairbairn, for action on rural rehabilitation. He was heard too on matters of national as well as parochial importance. Taking a keen interest in the treatment of infantile paralysis victims, he was an advocate of support for the controversial Sister Elizabeth Kenny. From his earliest days in Parliament, he also put down his marker on defence matters. In a triple-barrelled question bristling with innuendo, he asked Archdale Parkhill in November 1934 whether the Minister for Defence dealt directly with members of the Military Board on matters affecting their departments: how many times since 1919 had the Council of Defence met and when was the last time; and how was the allocation of the defence vote amongst the various services determined? He returned to the subject six months later, expressing his incredulity that the Council of Defence, whose statutory powers were extensive, had not met since November 1929. An embarrassed minister announced the reconstruction of the Council a few days later.

In answer to what looked very much like an invited question, Street was told late in November 1935 by the Attorney-General Robert Menzies, representing the Minister for External Affairs, that the government was looking into ways in which the staff of the Department of External Affairs might be increased to ‘adequate proportions’. These and other queries and pinpricks showed the member for Corangamite to be an adroit parliamentary performer. He trod carefully around the trade diversion minefield, making plain in an unplanned intervention in praise of the hard-pressed Trade Negotiations Minister, Harry

26 *Terang Express*, 16 Aug. 1940.
28 *Canberra Times*, 21 Nov. 1935.
Gullett, that he and other wool growers had loyally obeyed the request of the Prime Minister to refrain from taking part in the dispute. He was careful to distance himself from Labor’s schemes for banking reform and rural rehabilitation, but argued that defence should be above party politics. On set-piece occasions he was accomplished, authoritative, and courteous, seen to particular advantage for example in the 1936–37 Budget debate; then he advanced the case for a strong Air Force and an increase in the Army’s Permanent Forces to two cavalry regiments and a brigade of infantry. He would reiterate this theme the following year, urging the addition of a brigade of field artillery, and the expansion of the Royal Military College at Duntroon.29 Many observers were convinced that he would have made his way into the Cabinet after the 1937 election had the Prime Minister not been obliged to find places for representatives of the smaller states.

## Into the inner circle

In July 1938 Lyons attempted to lighten the load of two of his most overburdened ministers, the Treasurer and the Defence Minister. J. N. Lawson was added to R. G. Casey’s Treasury team in the innovative capacity of Parliamentary Secretary. At Defence, whose role was growing rapidly as the government began to realise its unpreparedness in the face of the worsening European situation, H. V. Thorby, deputy leader of the Country Party, was increasingly weighed down with responsibility for all three services as well as Civil Aviation; but he was unwilling to delegate. More seriously, as General Squires told the New South Wales Governor, Lord Wakehurst, a few months later, Thorby ‘has no ideas on defence of much wider scope than the W.C.s he began life by building’.30 Lyons, prompted by Fred Shedden, appointed Geoff Street to the same novel role as Jack Lawson. Neither man would be permitted to answer parliamentary questions. They were to be unpaid assistant ministers, a position unknown to the constitution.31 The case for creating a separate ministry of civil aviation, also a transport department, was strong.32 Soon to be embarking on an even larger role, ‘terrifying at first’, Street would tell Charles Hawker: ‘My one regret is Jim. I feel that he is being wasted and I don’t know why.’33

Jim Fairbairn’s turn was still to come. Meanwhile, pending a major reshuffle, which was widely believed to await the return of Sir Earle Page, Robert Menzies, and Tommy White from a mission to London, the promotion of Street

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33 Street to Hawker, n.d., Hawker MSS, NLA MS 4848/2/4.
brought into the government someone whom the *Sydney Morning Herald* called ‘a discerning advocate of the strengthening of the national defence’. His support for a small, well-trained, permanent Army was well known. His military background and current post as colonel commanding the 3rd Cavalry Brigade would give credibility to his views. Privately he had made clear his support for the idea of appointing a commander-in-chief, and it was not long before Tom Blamey was being sounded out.34

In late October and early November, following the Munich crisis, Street was on the periphery as a divided Cabinet debated and rejected the introduction of universal training, announcing instead that the Militia would be increased to 70 000 men, ‘if possible’ by voluntary enlistment. A well-publicised threat of resignation by Menzies came to nothing. He had support in Cabinet from Casey and Tommy White and probably two others.35 From outside, the Young Nationalist Organisation president, Ned Herring, was pressing the Prime Minister for a separate Army minister and the appointment of a commander-in-chief as well as ‘universal physical and military training for home defence’.36 But it was not enough. The principal stumbling block was Lyons, who was pledged not to introduce ‘conscription’. Lieutenant General Ernest Squires, the distinguished British officer recently installed as ‘Inspector-General’ of the Australian Army, was a close observer of the political aftermath:

A secret session this morning [7 November 1938] with Shedden, the Chiefs of Staff, & Munitions people, to consider possible re-organization of the Defence Dept — what the upshot will be, we don’t yet know — but we fear that a new & forceful Defence Minister will probably not be the P. M.’s solution of the difficulty.

The next day brought a surprise:

Street has been made Minister for Defence — with Civil Aviation removed — & Thorby Minister for Works & Civil Aviation: a sheer piece of face-saving as far as Thorby is concerned, & Street’s appointment has largely been stultified by his non-inclusion in the newly-invented ‘Inner Cabinet’ — a monstrous business, on the strength of which Tommy White has resigned the Ministry of Customs.

The ‘monstrous business’ of an ‘inner Cabinet’ did not in fact materialise, although Street’s name was hastily added to the senior Cabinet group. His appointment was widely commended, even by those like Sir Harry Gullett

36 ‘Young Nationalist Conference — Correspondence — PM & Minister’, Shedden MSS, NAA: A5954, 895/5.
who thought Tommy White had been badly treated. As Gullett put it in a character sketch of Street for Sir Keith Murdoch’s Herald on November 8: ‘He has advanced himself neither by intrigue nor by making himself a conspicuous nuisance to the administration of the day. His speeches have been relatively few and have been marked by earnestness rather than by any dramatic quality.’ Wishing the new minister well, Gullett warned that with responsibility for all three of the fighting services he faced ‘a task of a heartbreaking and almost impossible kind’.  

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37 Squires diary, 7, 8, 11 Nov. 1938, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 1; Wakehurst diary, 17 Nov. 1938, in Lord Wakehurst, ts memoirs [ca 1966–71], John de Vere Wakehurst Papers, NSW State Library ML MSS 1788 Add-on 1043. Noting Street’s lack of ministerial experience and alleged lack of ‘standing’, Eric Andrews says that Street’s appointment, like that of Thorby, rather than Menzies or Casey, ‘reveals Lyons’s pre-occupation with internal politics and an amazing failure to realise the overriding importance of the Defence portfolio at the time’ (The Department of Defence: The Australian Centenary History of Defence, vol. 5, Oxford UP, 2001, pp.88–9, 106). Andrews appears to have followed Paul Hasluck’s condescending assessment of Street’s ‘enthusiasm and a knowledge of soldiering…together with the frank and agreeable manners of an honest and manly character’ (The Government and the People 1939–1941, p.107).
General Squires already knew the heartbreak. But he quickly found himself cheered by the new minister. Whereas under Thorby, he told Lord Wakehurst, there had been ‘a lack of thinking things out and too many piece-meal announcements…made without consulting the soldiers’, Squires had hopes that ‘things will be better co-ordinated under Street who has commanded a militia brigade and knows what’s what’. ‘I have great hopes that, under him, we shall really be able to get a move on — & I gather, he’s prepared to go large in putting the A. M. F. on a proper footing.’ Street did indeed ‘go large’ and, after ‘a tremendous battle’ in Cabinet, got his defence program through with only a very small cut.38 Eight days after his appointment, Street brought to Cabinet proposals for an expanded defence program. Increased funding, from £43 million to £62.5 million, was announced in December. In the week before Street’s promotion Lyons had stated the government’s intention to order 50 of the Lockheed company’s new Hudson bombers. This was a precaution in case an order for British Beaufort torpedo bombers — which a misleadingly-advised Cabinet was in effect foisting on an unwilling Air Board — failed to materialise. The British had initially urged the Australian government to set up its own manufacturing plant to build Beauforts; they finally decided to allow Australian production only of components. Anxious to protect the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation (CAC), but under pressure from the British, Geoff Street took an implausible compromise proposal to Cabinet: the CAC should produce as the power plant for the Hudsons the unproven British Taurus engines as well as the Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasps for which the CAC was already tooling up. This was the beginning rather than the end of a process of indecision and policy reversal that would beset the Beaufort project for the next two years.39

Barely a month after he came into office Street moved to remedy what he saw as one of the defects of peacetime military organisation — the lack of opportunity for Citizen Force officers to gain the experience of staff duties that would be expected of future senior commanders. He approved the creation of over a dozen staff appointments for Militia officers. But, while he could ensure the existence of posts for the Militia, what he could not do was quell the rampant jealousies between permanent and citizen officers, Staff Corps and Militia. Many regular Army officers who had endured long hours and low pay through the 1930s were not pleased to see changes benefiting what they considered to be an already favoured Militia. For Staff Corps officers who had felt excluded from operational commands this was in fact a backward step. The rifts were too deep, affecting too many individuals with accumulated resentments and suspicions of unfair treatment.40

38 Squires diary, 3 Dec. 1938, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 1.
On 30 January 1939, refreshed from a game of cricket in which he took four for 56 for the Melbourne Cricket Club against a Southern Peninsula XI, Street sat down with the Chiefs of the Naval Staff, the Air Staff, and the Army’s General Staff, and the Chairman of the Principal Supply Officers’ Committee (also representing the Controller General of Munitions Supply), to discuss ‘The International Situation, Emergency Measures’. The Chiefs had been presented with information that the British had decided to ‘accelerate as far as possible the preparation with every defensive and counter-offensive measure’. Now Street made it clear to them that he required an urgent review of the state of preparedness, recommendations for immediate action, and steps that should be taken before the issue of the warning telegram if the situation continued to deteriorate. There was no room for complacency; and if anyone was tempted to
advance claims at the expense of the other Services they were forestalled by the instruction of Street’s departmental secretary, Fred Shedden, to exchange their statements and confer on the ‘joint Service relation of measures’.41

It was not long before Street was relying heavily on advice from General Squires. When Cabinet met in Hobart early in February 1939 the Inspector-General was asked to telephone and comment on what he called a ‘fantastic’ decision that no-one presenting to a recruiting centre was to be turned away whether they were needed or not. The requested comments were not complimentary. The British Inspector-General was not afraid to turn away willing volunteers. He was equally ready to dispense with redundant senior officers. The Defence Minister secured the Prime Minister’s support to act on a ‘most secret’ report from Squires urging a ‘drastic purge of senior S[taff], C[orps], officers.’ An unfortunate 12 were eventually told they were to be removed in August, only to be reprieved a week after war broke out, and then in some cases advised shortly afterwards that it had only been a stay of execution after all. Squires’ more far-reaching recommendations on Army re-organisation, including creation of a permanent mobile force were for the most part adopted in mid-March. However, it was not until the eve of war that Cabinet approved proposals for the extended training of about 15 000 Militia and improved training for the Militia as a whole.42

Brought more closely into the orbit of the senior members of the party, Street found himself attracted to the coming men rather than the older figures whose great days belonged to a cobwebbed past. Menzies and Casey were of his own generation. And it was a severe blow when Menzies chose to resign in March 1939, leaving Casey behind to bear the responsibility for the government’s abandonment of much of the scheme of national insurance to which they had both been strongly committed. At the Melbourne Club on Thursday night, March 16, two days after Menzies had left Canberra, Street sat down to write a letter that looked beyond the present severance:

Dear Bob

This is just a note to say how sorry I am about the position that has arisen.

I have been afraid for some time that it might arise but have always hoped against hope.

42 Squires diary, 7, 13, 17 Feb., 16–17 March, 12, 17 Aug., 11, 28 Sept. 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
You will forgive me if I say that I believe that the country cannot spare one who has such gifts. You have a very clear thinking mind, you have exceptional gifts of expression, logic and concentration on essentials. These are too rare to be missed.

May I just say that during my short association with you I have learnt a lot from you; I had hoped to learn more.

…all I can say is that I hope that events will soon make it possible for Australia to have the enormous benefits of your gifts.

Yours

Geoff

The sudden death of Joe Lyons barely a month later was the tragic event that enabled Menzies to return to power, before he had time to launch the ‘constructive and objective’ criticism of the government that he promised Street in his reply. Though not without misgivings, Street would have shared the opinion of the Governor-General that Menzies was ‘brilliantly clever, full of energy and will, I think, make a far better head of a government than a subordinate’. With Menzies at the head of the party and the government, and the Country Party refusing to join a Menzies Cabinet, Street found himself one of the inner circle. His popularity in the country — enhanced by his twice having refused to accept an increase in his parliamentary salary — was now matched by his position in the government. He was ranked fourth in the ministry behind only Billy Hughes and Dick Casey, neither of whom Menzies could afford to slight. It had been an exceptionally rapid rise.

Advanced in status, Street did not wait long before requesting the Chiefs of Staff to review defence policy. He now also had the opportunity to arrange the succession to Major General Lavarack as Chief of the General Staff. One of the moody Lavarack’s last significant moves was to endorse a proposal from the Military Board that Australia initiate preparations for defensive use of mustard gas ‘as spray or bombs’. This ‘Most Secret’ minute was not approved by Street until Lavarack had departed and his successor had been in place for over a month. In spite of fears that the appointment might turn out to be illegal, Lieutenant General Squires was gazetted as acting CGS on May 18. Almost his

43 Street to Menzies, 16 March 1939; Menzies to Street, 18 March 1939, copy, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/6.
44 Lord Gowrie to Walter Hore-Ruthven, 22 May 1939, copy, Gowrie MSS, NLA MS 2852/5/10.
45 Secretary, Military Board to Secretary, Department of Defence, 5 April 1939, initialled by Lavarack, 4 April 1939 and Street, 25 June 1939, NAA: A816, 9/301/89. The proposal did not gather momentum until the war was well advanced.
46 For the conflicting advice on the legality of Squires’ appointment as Inspector-General of the Army, and by implication his subsequent appointment as CGS, see Ronald J. Austin, ‘The appointment of Lieutenant-General Squires: the role of Major General Sir Carl Jess in the conflict between the military board and the government’, Sabretache (1 March 2003).
first major task was writing a paper for the minister on ‘the undesirability of introducing universal training at this time, when we have got an amply large enough, & very promising Militia (now over 75 000) & when we want to put every penny we can get into arms & equipment’. 47 The government’s war preparations advanced with the creation of a national register of manpower accompanied without enthusiasm by a census of wealth, the latter — a concession negotiated by Street — appeasing Labor critics of a census of males that could facilitate industrial conscription.

In a brief interruption to the demands of office, the Streets and their friends had a reminder of the success of a partnership that had lasted more than two decades. On 29 June 1939, Geoff and Gyp celebrated their twenty-first wedding anniversary at a dinner at Menzies Hotel. The years had treated them well. They had been blessed with a son and a daughter. Gyp cut a striking figure, always elegant and vital in any company. Some observers thought Geoff had aged since he joined the Cabinet. But he was not merely the fittest minister, he had also gained a reputation as the best-dressed one. Bob Menzies was overheard remarking: ‘By heaven, Geoff, you make me look more like a gentleman's gentleman every day.’ True, his principal sartorial rival Dick Casey was deemed the most handsome. But Geoff’s deeply furrowed forehead and cheeks were, as the Daily Telegraph had described this ‘typical Digger’, the frequently observed ‘characteristic of the Australian who has worked hard and long under hot suns on the land’. 48

The Minister’s new British friend, Ernest Squires, noted that the anniversary guests were ‘mostly Western District’. 49 Among them was the man who had stood with Street at the altar 21 years before. Lieutenant Colonel Frank Thornthwaite, Street’s best man in 1918, was to report to Squires’ staff just two days later. Thornthwaite would have enjoyed the story of how the Defence Minister had just faced down a deputation in Newcastle representing 500 businessmen, bank employees and ‘men from the industries’ who were demanding the creation of a kilted regiment. Official policy was that there should be one Highland regiment in each capital city. ‘It is not considered desirable to encourage different types of national units, when after all this is Australia.’ 50

At a Defence Council meeting on 6 July 1939 the CGS recorded:

Backed by the ‘co-opted’ Generals, Street & I managed…to scotch a fantastic scheme of Gullett’s; & we’ve got permission to work out a new programme for raising 2 1/2 quotas of the Permanent Force (about 3600

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47 Squires diary, 28 May 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
48 Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 22 Nov. 1938; Courier-Mail, 22 Feb. 1940; The Argus, 2 Dec. 1939.
49 Squires diary, 29 June 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
50 Unidentified press cutting, [June/July 1939], Street MSS.
men) as quickly as possible, & as cheaply as possible. There seems to be no chance of our getting any substantial increase in the total money allotted to us…51

The news became increasingly gloomy from Squires’ point of view:

A rather depressing talk with Street, about the chances of getting the revised Permanent force scheme through the Cabinet: what with uncertainty about this, the delays in introducing the Supplementary List & the ‘Command’ organization, the failure to do anything about new conditions of service for the Staff Corps. & to spend any more money in essential munitions — in spite of the Chiefs of Staff review — I don’t know whether I’m really justified in staying on here.

So dispirited was Street’s chief advisor with the government’s procrastination and misleading public statements about the progress of the defence program that he was ‘left with the unpleasant feeling of betraying the Army’s confidence, & letting them down’.52 As for Street himself, he was rapidly coming to the same conclusion. After a ‘heart to heart talk’ on the afternoon of July 28 Squires recorded:

The Cabinet are, we believe, going to take a number of Defence questions next week — many of them very important — & we’re both feeling very anxious, & wondering whether we’d be justified in staying on in our jobs if the Cabinet were to turn down the things which we consider to be necessary. He’s going to have a very difficult time, I’m afraid.53

Street’s anxieties suggest either that he was not enjoying the full support of the Prime Minister or that Menzies himself was not strong enough to compel acquiescence in his Defence Minister’s plans. Whatever Menzies’ true position, the worst fears of Street and Squires were realised. The Permanent Force scheme approved by the Lyons Cabinet was now turned down. Street had summoned the CGS urgently to Canberra on Tuesday afternoon, August 1: ‘I knew it must be an S. O. S., so didn’t feel optimistic.’ Luckily for Squires it was the one night of the week when there was a quick train connection from Albury, enabling him to arrive two hours before he was due to appear before the Cabinet at 11.00 a.m.

Cross-examined with ‘surprisingly unintelligent questions’, Squires realised that the real reason the scheme was rejected was financial. There was some consolation in that ministers had been logical enough to decide to rely on training the Militia to a higher standard. And, after a talk with Menzies, the Prime Minister agreed to hold meetings of the Defence Council monthly.

51 Squires diary, 6 July 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
52 Squires diary, 24 July 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
53 Squires diary, 28 July 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
However, it was not until the eve of war that Cabinet approved proposals for the extended training of about 15 000 Militia and improved training for the Militia as a whole. What they were not prepared to do as late as August 30, when the Prime Minister ‘harangued’ all the Service Boards together, was spend any more money than had already been allotted.54

On Friday, 1 September 1939, Councillor Street was making one of his now rare appearances at a Hampden shire council meeting. Called from a committee room late in the afternoon he bounded down two flights of stairs, ran to his car, and sped to Melbourne. It was the last time he was to be seen at a council meeting.55 The next day a Federal Executive Council meeting, with the Governor of Victoria, Sir Winston Dugan, acting for the Governor-General, concluded that it was time to ‘proclaim the existence of danger of war’. The proclamation was signed by the Minister for Defence ‘G. A. Street’. In the terms of the Defence Act, ministers had in effect declared that they were now in ‘a time of war’. When ministers emerged from a long Cabinet meeting on Sunday, September 3, alerted to the British government’s intention to set Germany a deadline for assurances that it would withdraw its forces from Poland, it was Street as Minister for Defence who communicated a simple message: the fighting services were ready; the public were calm.56 Later that night the Director of Military

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54 Squires diary, 1, 2, 3, 23, 30 Aug. 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
55 *The Lismore Advertiser*, 21 Aug. 1940.
56 *Canberra Times*, 4 Sept. 1939, p.2.
Intelligence, Colonel ‘Boz’ Combes, arrived outside the minister’s office where Street’s assistant private secretary, Garry Armstrong, was awaiting news from London of the declaration of war:

‘Can I see the minister?’ I opened the door and hesitated there, and Combes said to him, ‘well it’s on sir.’ With twinkling eyes the minister jumped up and said ‘Oh grand Boz. Have you got the signal from the War Office?’ ‘No sir,’ he said ‘I heard it on 3DB.’

Meanwhile, in Treasury Place the group called to constitute the Federal Executive Council had heard the announcement from the BBC. With war declared, the Prime Minister’s ‘melancholy duty’ to inform the nation performed, Menzies suggested that there should be a toast to peace. Neither glasses nor anything to drink could be found at the Commonwealth offices, so the Prime Minister’s assistant private secretary, was dispatched to Jim Fairbairn’s nearby flat at Alcaston House on the corner of Spring Street and Collins Street. Within half an hour the assembled ministers, Sir Winston Dugan acting for the Governor-General, and several private secretaries, had toasted peace. The Army Minister, at his desk in Victoria Barracks, was already prosecuting the war. At 10.25 p.m. the Defence Department Secretary Fred Shedden sent a copy of the ‘War’ telegram received from the Dominions Office to the Secretary of the Military Board. Stamped ‘Most Immediate’, it was initialled by the Acting Chief of the General Staff 10 minutes later. In his excitement Shedden had signed and dated the covering minute ‘3/9/38’. It could not have been more immediate.

The first few weeks of war brought rapid changes of organisation. As Defence Minister, Street brought to Cabinet a paper prepared by Fred Shedden on ‘Machinery for Higher Direction of War’. As a member of the resulting War Cabinet, Street was an inevitable leading participant in conclave with the Service chiefs and the Prime Minister. There was much hesitation and uncertainty about the way in which a manifestly ill-equipped and under-resourced Army, desperately short of trained officers, could best be put on a war footing. On September 15 Menzies announced a scheme for raising an expeditionary force of 20 000 and the call up of the Militia in two groups for a month’s continuous training. Three days later, after two hours with Squires who went with him

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58 Sir Cecil Looker, interview with Alan Hodgart, 1975, (NLA Oral TRC 370; nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn87421). Realising it was a historic moment, Looker souvenired one of the glasses.
59 ‘Record of Government decisions just prior to and after the outbreak of War 3rd September 1939’, AWM: 54 243/6/153.
to a conference with the Prime Minister, Shedden, and the other two Service chiefs, Street kept Squires back for a further talk with Menzies. Street intimated to the CGS that the government wanted him to stay on in Australia rather than return to Britain.

The next day in Canberra Street publicly explained the plans for the Militia and the proposed ‘Special force’. It was a good speech, Squires noted, ‘but that hasn’t & probably won’t silence the storm of abuse in certain papers, nor their fantastic suggestions, made quite regardless of facts’. The storm of abuse went to the fundamental policy of the maintenance of two armies. It was hoped that half of the volunteer army would be former militiamen, another quarter would have previous Militia service, and the rest would be from country areas where Militia training had been largely in abeyance since the early 1920s. They would be eligible for overseas service in the 6th Division. The residual Militia would not. The ensuing recruitment drive was lacklustre, and some Militia commanders openly discouraged their men from volunteering for the AIF.

It would have been strange had the government, and the Defence Minister in particular, not been the focus of press criticism and discontent in the early months of the war. Although the announcement that Sir Thomas Blamey would command the troops being gathered to send overseas was popular, subsequent general officer appointments had a mixed reception. And alleged deficiencies and dilatoriness in mobilising resources made Street and Squires, who had moved his belongings into the room of the Chief of the General Staff on October 14, easy targets. Late in October the government announced that compulsory military training — three months for 20-year-olds — would be introduced in January. The numbers called up, the CGS noted, would be those required ‘to fill gaps in the Militia caused by transfers to the 2nd AIF & the withdrawal (to a Militia reserve) of married & “key” men’. Street had discussed it with Squires several times. But the Military Board had not been consulted. ‘Strange people, these politicians,’ Squires commented.

Stranger still were the political masters of the armed services as the months wore on. As Squires confided to his diary, ‘the position of the Chiefs of Staff vis-à vis the Cabinet is becoming quite impossible; & it’s becoming equally impossible to plan for the future without knowing what we are planning for’. Most vexing was the continuing delay in settling on the despatch of the 6th Division. For this, and many other frustrations, Squires realised that Street was not to blame. In a ‘personal and confidential’ letter to his predecessor John Lavarack he had explained a few weeks after the war began:

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62 Squires diary, 18, 19, 23 Sept. 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
64 Squires diary, 21 Oct. 1939, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 2.
65 Squires diary, 28 Nov. [wrongly dated by Squires ‘Dec.’], 1939 UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 3.
I’m terribly sorry for Street, he’s having an awfully difficult time, as he says the Cabinet contains 15 Defence Ministers, & their interference with what are purely domestic Army matters is becoming intolerable. They apparently regard themselves as entitled to decide everything for us — including appointments! Luckily Menzies is realizing at last the futility of the present method of conducting business, & the War Cabinet is to start functioning next week.66

A multiplicity of Defence ministers had its frustrations but it also had some benefits. In the early months of the war Street’s portfolio still embraced the RAAF. There were big decisions to be taken about the role of the Air Force and it quickly became obvious that the burden had to be shared.

Dick Casey, as Minister for Supply and Development, took up procurement and production, and Civil Aviation Minister Jim Fairbairn picked up questions of facilities and training. From mid-November all aviation issues would come within the purview of the new Air Ministry. But, in the meantime, some matters were unavoidably the responsibility of the Defence Minister. Street was thus embroiled in the conflict between the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Vice Marshal S. J. Goble, and the Air Member for Personnel, Air Commodore J. C. Russell,

66 Squires to Lavarack, 22–24 Sept. 1939, Lavarack Papers, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 164 Box 4, folder 13.
who was on secondment from the RAF. When taxed by Street on 11 November 1939 with the Cabinet’s concern over a ‘reported lack of co-operation’ between members of the Air Staff and other branches, Goble had responded that Russell had been ‘a great hindrance to progress’ and had ‘stubbornly refused to adjust himself to local conditions and regulations and has shown marked inconsistency and unreliability in his opinions and statements on service matters’. Goble made the mistake of concluding that: ‘I find it impossible to carry on unless there is stability in the direction of the Branch of the Air Member for Personnel.’ His private and confidential letter was passed by Street to the Prime Minister.67

By the end of the year, Goble’s fate was sealed. The appointment as Chief of the Air Staff of 58-year-old Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, nominally one of two Inspector-Generals of the RAF, was announced by the Prime Minister on 5 January 1940. Russell, who had blotted his copybook with Menzies as well, was shortly to return to the United Kingdom.68 After a period of leave, the hapless Goble was sent to Canada to look after the Empire Air Training Scheme there. As if to epitomise his propensity to make seriously poor choices, Goble and his wife were passengers on the ill-fated Niagra en route to Vancouver in June 1940. They were lucky to be rescued when the ship, carrying a fortune in gold and a large quantity of small arms and ammunition, struck a mine and sank in the Hauraki Gulf, north of Auckland.69

‘One of the most deceptive men in the Federal Cabinet’

Street, like the Prime Minister, as well as Fairbairn, Gullett, and the Country Party’s John McEwen, had homes in Victoria. Melbourne was the preferred venue for War Cabinet meetings. There were strong practical reasons for this since Canberra meetings, usually confined to periods when Parliament was sitting, entailed the transfer and accommodation of staff and the transport of voluminous files.70 Menzies had been determined that Canberra should not be a deserted village when Parliament was not in session. But the gravitational pull of Melbourne remained powerful. From mid-November 1939 the Defence ministry was split into separate Navy, Air, and Army departments. This ‘drastic re-arrangement’, as the Prime Minister described it, was ‘in no sense a reflection

67 AVM S. J. Goble (CAS) to Minister for Defence (Street), 12 Nov. 1939, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/4.
69 A rumour sweeping the Niagra’s 1st class breakfast tables that Goble wore a corset had been confirmed when some enterprising young women disrobed him at a party in the captain’s cabin the night before the disaster (Keith Gordon, Deep Water Gold: The story of RMS Niagra – the quest for New Zealand’s greatest shipwreck treasure, SeaROV Technologies Ltd, Whangarei, 2005, pp.34–5).
70 Horner, Defence Supremo, pp.81–2.
on my colleague…the best tribute I can pay to my colleague’s labours is implicit in the fact from now on there will be three Ministers busily employed in doing what he has been doing alone for some time past’.71

His labours now focused on Army matters, Street’s office at Victoria Barracks was on the first floor of the northern wing, across the corridor from Fred Shedden, now the Secretary of the Department of Defence Co-ordination and Secretary of the War Cabinet. The minister was close to the Chief of the General Staff. And to the evident approval of Squires he attended a meeting of the Military Board for the first time on 23 January 1940.72 It had been an auspicious day as 5000 Victorian members of the 2nd AIF marched through a throng estimated at 500 000, the largest crowd ever seen in the city streets. The ‘noble bearing’ of the men ‘has touched our hearts’, Street said. ‘Today’s great march was more than symbolical: it was proof that the spirit of the old A.I.F. has survived.’ There was something also more than symbolical in the Army Minister’s conclusion. The Prime Minister had praised the demeanour of men and onlookers for their ‘quiet seriousness and determination which have really been the characteristics of the British people in this war’. Street, knowing his audience better, struck a different note, national not imperial: the men of the 6th Division were leading ‘Australia’s crusade for justice and permanent peace’.73

‘Mr Street is one of the most deceptive men in the Federal Cabinet,’ the Sydney Morning Herald’s Canberra correspondent had written just before the outbreak of war. ‘He is almost invariably underestimated on first acquaintance, because of his restraint, courtesy, and unassuming manner.’ He was, recalled Frank Green who, as Clerk of the House of Representatives, observed him at close quarters, ‘a quiet man, but of the kind in whom ordinary people have confidence’.74 Owing much to unaffected geniality, Street’s public popularity also reflected skilful use of the press. ‘An unheard-of innovation’, the appointment of a press officer to the Defence Department, embodied the new minister’s belief that ‘as far as possible the people of Australia should be told what we are doing and how their money is being spent’.75 The ‘press and information officer’, Allan Dawes, made sure that editors were served with lively biographical material on his chief. Not that Street seemed to need much coaching on press relations. He instinctively knew what reporters and photographers needed. His cricket library, ‘a result of the activities of dealers and collectors all over the world’, made good copy as it grew from 500 to 600 volumes. He would happily pause in open-necked shirt

72 Squires diary, 23 Jan. 1940, UNSW@ADFA Library, MS 184 folder 3.
73 Sydney Morning Herald, 24 Jan. 1940. In an Australia Day broadcast for England, Menzies made some amends: ‘the major element in the British genius’ was that it had been able to ‘reconcile the unity of an Empire with the independent development of the individuality and character of each of its parts’ (The Age, 26 Jan. 1940).
74 Sydney Morning Herald, 26 Aug. 1939; Green, Servant of The House, p.118.
75 The Sun, 22 Nov. 1938.
and shorts when caught on the Canberra golf course in hot weather. He would strike a Victor Trumper-like pose while getting some batting practice before going out to play for the MCC with the great Bill Ponsford and the brilliant Victorian batsman Percy Beames against a Fremantle XI.

The Minister’s cricket exploits were a source of endless fascination, whether it was his multi-wicket hauls with ‘vicious’ leg spin or bamboozling Arthur Mailey, Herbie Collins, his wartime friend Charles Kelleway, and others with his prodigious memory of their statistics and performances. Or simply the fact that he was chosen to play alongside Bill Woodfull and Jack Ryder in an Australia v. England night match organised for charity at the Exhibition Building by the Australasian Electric Light Cricket Association. Street’s comfort with the press contrasted with the Prime Minister’s indifference. Touring naval dockyards in Sydney in January 1940, the Defence Minister fretted as Menzies turned his back and covered his face with his hands when reporters saw him taking an interest in the chart room. The Prime Minister was ‘a nightmare to his publicity man’. Reporters noticed that Street persuaded Menzies to pose later in front of a gyro compass aboard a cruiser exercising with live shells outside Sydney Heads.76

As Army Minister it was Street’s responsibility and prerogative to recommend the officers to hold the most senior military appointments. Probably no minister before or since was so intimately acquainted with the candidates for promotion. He had served with many of them. Just over a year before war broke out, he had spent a week enrolled with 28 major generals, brigadiers, and colonels at the new Command and Staff School in Sydney.77 Resigning his commission on entering the Cabinet had been a sad moment. But it would not do to be his own superior yet junior to those whose futures were in his hands. With the expansion of the 2nd AIF into a Corps, and Blamey’s elevation as Corps Commander, there were two divisional commands to fill in March 1940. Conscious of the rivalries between Staff Corps and Militia officers, and personally acquainted with all those who were qualified, he opted for the former CGS, Lieutenant General John Lavarack, for the 6th Division and Major General Iven Mackay (under whom he served in 1918) for the 7th. The proposal of the volatile Lavarack for the 6th Division appalled Blamey, who catalogued Lavarack’s ‘temperamental disqualifications’ both for the Army Minister and the Minister for Defence Co-ordination. (Writing to the Prime Minister in his capacity as Minister for Defence Co-ordination was a fig leaf of protocol to cover the inappropriateness

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77 Sydney Morning Herald, 9 Aug. 1938.
Ten Journeys to Cameron’s Farm

of going over Street’s head). ‘Uncontrolled outbreaks,’ he wrote, ‘have been all
too frequent in his work, in the presence of junior officers, in private places, and
in the sporting field.’ Blamey asked for the opportunity to discuss the matter
with Street, Menzies, and ‘if you think fit, General White’.

Obviously afraid that Street would ignore his plea, Blamey sent a copy of his
letter to Menzies with a covering letter damning Lavarack as not appearing
to have ‘the necessary amount of stability and wisdom in his make-up to be
entrusted with this responsibility practically away from all control’. Friction
was inevitable, Blamey warned. The friction Menzies apprehended in the first
instance was Street’s reaction if he read Blamey’s excuse for writing direct to
the Prime Minister. Blamey explained that he was not sure that his letter, sent
three days earlier, would have reached Street. In a pencilled note to his private
secretary, Menzies instructed ‘Do not pass on!’ Blamey was firmly put in his
place. Menzies would discuss the matter with his colleagues, and would treat
his correspondence as confidential. Not content to rely on the ordinary mail
to reach the Prime Minister in time, and having received no reply from Street,
Blamey sent copies of the previous correspondence together with a second
protest at an appointment that would be ‘terribly unwise’. Probably suspecting
as well the malign hand of Fred Shedden, no friend of Lavarack, Street had
already written to the Prime Minister in his own hand before Blamey’s second
letter was despatched:

Both Squires & White agreed that Lavarack was the man for the job. The
Military Board recommended Lavarack. I know his failings but I also
recommend him.

Blamey does not like him & says ‘I fear greatly the cool judgment
necessary in war will be lacking particularly when things are going
wrong and the pressure is on.’

I have given very careful consideration to General Blamey’s viewpoint.
Notwithstanding all he says I stick to my recommendation which is I am
sure sound.

Both Sturdee and Wynter would do the job well — in fact there are
others who could doubtless do the job well — but I think Laverack is
the best. It will be well received in the Service & I think the only person
who will not be satisfied will be Blamey (& perhaps Jess!).

Street rang Corby Tritton, the Prime Minister’s private secretary, urging him
to ensure that the matter was dealt with promptly. Ministers needed to be
consulted. Until the divisional commanders were named, no action could be
taken on appointing the staffs to the Corps and divisional commands. ‘I also
want to beat the press to any announcement that may be made!’ It was two
weeks before the appointments were confirmed by the War Cabinet, the minutes discreetly recording that ‘The Chief of the General Staff and the G. O. C. of the Australian Army Corps were consulted separately.’ Blamey, apparently with Brudenell White’s support, succeeded in thwarting Laverack’s appointment to the 6th Division which went instead to Iven Mackay. Laverack, taking a step down in rank, went to the 7th Division.

Much as he was absorbed in the work of the Army and War Cabinet, Street chafed at the limits of his authority, attenuated by an unbounded Prime Ministerial ego and Fred Shedden’s unsleeping drive for control. He yearned to be closer to the battle front. When the British government indicated that it would like to have a Light Horse Brigade and attendant troops he made it clear to Menzies that he wanted to take his place at its head. His desire to escape and serve in uniform had clouded his judgment. As the Governor-General Lord Gowrie confided to the Prime Minister:

As regards the Command of the Brigade, you mention that Street was very anxious to obtain it, but do you think that would be altogether wise an appointment? I am sure he would make an excellent Commander in every way, but I am rather afraid his appointment might cause a good deal of heart-burning in Light Horse ranks. There are a splendid lot of men to choose from and don’t you think they might be a little bit annoyed if the Minister for the Army was instrumental in appointing himself to what may be the only Light Horse Command for foreign service? I know, of course, that the appointment would be made by the War Cabinet and not by Street himself, but he would always be accused of having influenced his own appointment.

As it turned out, the idea of forming a Cavalry Brigade was dropped a few weeks later at almost exactly the same time as an article that looked like a job application — ‘a vigorous vindication of the cavalry arm’ — appeared under Street’s name in the Sydney Morning Herald. Two days later it became clear that destiny still had plans for him. Stopping on his way home to talk to an officer outside Victoria Barracks he stepped a few paces backwards just as a large pane of glass crashed to the ground from a third storey window. ‘It might have killed me’, he told a reporter.

78 Street to Prime Minister, 8 March 1940, ‘Most Confidential’; Blamey to Menzies, 11 March 1940, with enclosed copy Blamey to Street, 8 March 1940; Menzies to Blamey, 12 March 1940, copy, Blamey to Menzies, 12 March 1940; Street to Menzies, 11 March 1940, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/5; Minutes of War Cabinet Meeting, 21 March 1940, NAA: A2673.
79 Lord Gowrie to Prime Minister, 25 March 1940, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/579/5.
80 Telegram, Prime Minister’s Dept to Sec. of State for Dominion Affairs, 6 April 1940, copy, Menzies MSS, NLA MS 4936/581/23; ‘The Light Horse in War’, Sydney Morning Herald, 3 April 1940. The Military Board and senior officers had been debating the utility of various possible mounted infantry and mechanised cavalry units (Captain James C. Morrison, Mechanising an Army: Mechanisation Policy and the Conversion of the Light Horse 1920–1943, Study Paper No. 307, Land Warfare Studies Centre, June 2006, pp.57–68).
81 The Argus, 8 April 1940.
Talking to Australian newspapermen in New York, Dick Casey heard of ‘a good remark of Geoff Street’s – Australia to Britain – “We remain, Yours faithfully”’. The phrase was in fact the end of a robust speech Street had delivered at Avoca on 3 August 1940. He condemned rumour mongering and destructive criticism, ‘not merely useless, it is noxious and even dangerous’. Contrary to German propaganda that Australia had declined to send more men abroad to aid the British cause: ‘We have refused nothing, and will refuse nothing, not a man, not a machine, not a shilling, not a shell, to Great Britain.’ Like everyone in the upper reaches of the Australian government, the Army Minister was attuned to the delicate balance of imperial and national interests. He also understood the need not only to maintain the morale of the population at large but also among the troops in training.

No one at the Puckapunyal camp would ever forget the day the minister turned up for an inspection, asked if a horse could be made available, and cantered around the installations in jodhpurs and a canary yellow shirt. Street’s jodhpurs, open necked shirts, and sports jackets served him well on visits to other camps, earning him press plaudits when the Prime Minister was thought to be ‘slightly de trop’ in a Homburg hat and ‘a great black overcoat worthy of the Archbishop of Canterbury’.

82 Casey diary, 9 Aug. 1940, Casey MSS, NLA MS 6150.
Reporting in detail on Street’s tireless visits to Service units around the country, his note-taking and recording of details on a miniature camera, the regional press and afternoon tabloids displayed unquenchable interest in the Army Minister. Their enthusiastic stories about ‘A.M.’, as the troops called him because of his early morning inspections, more than compensated for the occasional policy grumblings and chidings of the metropolitan broadsheets.\(^83\)

Obliged to travel up and down to Canberra regularly, Street was one of the first ministers to experience the RAAF’s new Lockheed Hudsons. On April 29 he joined Sir Charles Burnett in a Hudson of No 1 Squadron to fly to Canberra and back in one day.\(^84\) He was happy enough to take the train when there was no rush. If the Prime Minister was on board, they might swap cricket stories and statistics over dinner. Then he would retire to the compartment he shared with Garry Armstrong, the young officer, law graduate, and family friend of Brudenell White whose appointment to the minister’s office had been forced on Fred Shedden in April 1939. Armstrong knew he could expect to be woken early wherever they were and put through a set of exercises. When Street stayed in Canberra, Armstrong would be called out from his bed on the balcony of the Hotel Canberra at 6.00 a.m. for a three or four-mile run around the Royal Canberra golf links. Percy Spender and Bill McCall, the baby of the House of Representatives, would occasionally join them. To Armstrong, 20 years Street’s junior, his chief’s relentless physical fitness regime was balanced by ‘a lightning mind, a grand sense of humour’. In his mid-40s, at the height of his powers, Geoff Street was ‘a lean, virile, subtle man’ of boundless energy. In Melbourne, he lunched frugally at his Victoria Barracks desk, sometimes foregoing lunch altogether to go ice-skating. He rarely drank, and never smoked. Admired by public servants, he was trusted by senior military men who could rely on him to understand their point of view, tell them plainly if he disagreed, and fight their cause in the War Cabinet. ‘Soft voiced, and with a delightful boyish smile’, he was liked and respected on both sides of the House.\(^85\)

Next to the Prime Minister, Street was by mid-1940 the most prominent member of the government. With the AIF 6\(^{th}\) Division raised, the 7\(^{th}\) Division and the Corps Troops being recruited, the decision to form an eighth division announced by the Prime Minister late in May, and Bertie Lloyd freshly installed as Director-General of Recruiting, Street knew the time had come for a major appeal for men: ‘As Minister for the Army it is I who should make his voice ring clearly.’ Newspapers in his electorate and around the nation published his speeches and radio broadcasts verbatim. They were replete with exhortations to the manhood

\(^83\) The Argus, 28 Oct. 1939; The Herald, 29 June 1940; The Sun, 19 July 1940; The Stawell News, 20 July 1940.
\(^84\) No. 1 Squadron Operations Record Book, NAA: A9186, 1/176.
\(^85\) Garry Armstrong, taped reminiscences, Nov.–Dec. 1982; A. A. Street to CH, 31 March 2010; Sydney Morning Herald, 22 March, 14 Aug. 1940.
of Australia to join the forces and resist the ‘mailed fist of the marauder thrust into our very faces…The march of the horde of the Huns must be stopped…We are fighting savages.’

Uncomfortable as he might be with such rhetorical excess, Street was ever alert to opportunities to promote the ministry’s more prosaic activities. He announced on August 6 that the government was going to purchase 2000 Australian-made bicycles. The machines did not herald the formation of a cyclists’ corps. Rather, they were to be available for signallers and battalion runners in AIF and Citizen Force units. In the great scheme of things for which he was responsible, the 2000 bicycles were a trivial diversion. More serious were the hospital matters brought to him in the evening of August 12 by Major General Rupert Downes, Director-General of Medical Services, who was pressing for membership of the Military Board. Discussion with Downes would continue late into the night over the vexed question of the Red Cross being the sole agent for gifts for medical services. But when Street excused himself to dine at the Melbourne Club with the Rutherford Guthries, the bicycles were at least something he could talk about without revealing too much of the strategic dilemmas that he and the Chief of the General Staff would be confronting in Canberra the next day.

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86 Colac Reformer, 25 May 1940.
87 Canberra Times, 7 Aug. 1940, p.4.