11. Best man: Frank Thornthwaite

As he crossed the Essendon tarmac to take his place in the waiting Hudson, Geoff Street was accompanied by another old friend. A very dear friend. A neighbouring pastoralist at Derrinallum. A wartime comrade in arms. The man who had stood at his side on his wedding day in London in 1918. The man for whom he himself was best man at St Columba’s Pont Street, London, on 23 November 1918. The man married to his wife’s cousin and closest friend, Lorna Maud Inez Currie, always known as Inez.

Lieutenant Colonel Francis Thornthwaite, who had driven out to the aerodrome with the Army Minister, had been a career artillery officer with a distinguished record in the Great War. Recalled to service just before the German invasion of Poland, he was now a General Staff Officer I in the Department of the Army, assigned as Army Liaison Officer attached to the Department of Defence Coordination. In practice he was the Chief of the General Staff’s right-hand man. Born in Launceston in February 1890, Francis Thornthwaite was the son of William Wright Thornthwaite, an immigrant from Manchester who had married Frances (Fanny) Stackhouse, only daughter of the rector of Longford, the Rev. Alfred Stackhouse of the Tasmanian early-settler family, in 1885. William Thornthwaite, almost blind from a childhood accident, was a leading light in Tasmanian musical circles. After training in London in piano, organ, and singing he had arrived in Hobart in 1880 and began at once advertising his services as a music teacher. Soon appointed organist at Hobart’s St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church he moved to Launceston in 1884 as organist at St John’s, then to Paterson Street Methodist Church, eventually becoming Launceston City Organist, conductor of the Launceston Philharmonic Society, and founder of the local branch of the Trinity College of Music.
William, still in his twenties, and Fanny (10 years his senior) already had two children when Francis was born; and a fourth soon followed. Educated at Launceston High School — a small independent establishment soon to hit hard times and merge with Launceston Grammar School — Francis had dropped out of the Bachelor of Arts course at the University of Tasmania and enlisted in the Army a few months before his twentieth birthday. Commissioned as a lieutenant in the Royal Australian Garrison Artillery in December 1910, he completed a short course in gunnery and then a master gunner’s course, and transferred to No. 2 Battery, Royal Australian Field Artillery a year later.

Within two weeks of the outbreak of war in August 1914 Frank Thornthwaite, as he came to be known, enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force. Army records noted that he was 5' 10" tall and weighed 12 stone; he had ‘good’ eyesight and a 36/38" chest. In October 1914 he left Australia on the Argyllshire with the AIF’s First Division Artillery. He was among the earliest to reach Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 with the first Australian battery. But, in the ensuing chaos in finding suitable emplacements for the ANZAC Corps guns, all four Australian batteries spent the next two weeks watching the action from troopships. They were then sent to Cape Helles, attached to the British 29th Division. Hospitalised briefly in Malta, Thornthwaite returned as adjutant of the Australian First Division Artillery from October to December 1915. For six weeks, on flimsy sheets of graph paper, he kept diary notes of the daily routine of enemy shelling, ‘retaliation rounds’ on Turkish trenches, preparation of new gun pits, repositioning of guns, and construction of ‘funk pits’. The faithfully-listed names of sick, wounded, and killed, were punctuated by a rare ‘casualties nil’. From late November the gathering momentum of evacuation is recorded:

**November 20:**

Guns and limbers of 2nd Battery and all ammunition wagons less two of the 1st Battery moved from Shrapnel Valley to Reserve Gully ready to be embarked. All vehicles stripped and ammunition removed. Fatigue party manhandled vehicles from Rest Gully to bottom of Reserve Gully. Vehicles were not embarked but were parked ready to be embarked at short notice.

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4 Launceston High School, not to be confused with the later state school of the same name, amalgamated with Launceston Grammar in 1913 (Alison Alexander, _Blue, Black and White: The history of Launceston Church Grammar School 1846–1996_, Launceston, 1996, p.77).

The next day, 92 reinforcements arrived and were posted to units. Bad weather prevented the loading of the guns and wagons until the 23rd when they were embarked on lighters and placed on board H.T. Queen Louise. Then on November 24 begins the laconic record of the operation that was to be synonymous with the name of Brudenell White: ‘a conference of Brigade commanders was held at Div. Arty Hd Qrs. It was decided that fire would be withheld from the artillery for the next three (3) days.’ After three days, with the batteries not firing:

Report received that the Turks were massing in their trenches at six (6) different points along the line. All precautions taken in case of attack. Nothing eventuated however. Owing to inclement weather embarkation of the remaining vehicles of the brigade was further postponed.

Then the final diary entry:

The silent ruse on the part of the artillery agreed to on the 24th inst. Ended at 24.00 27th/28th inst. Normal conditions now prevail.
Heavy fall of snow during the night — and today, making roads impassable for mule traffic. Reserve supply of rations brought into use.

Batteries did not fire.

After departing from the Gallipoli peninsula at the end of 1915, Thornthwaite was to serve in Egypt, France, and Flanders. He was adjutant of the First Field Brigade and Brigade Major of the Fifth Australian Divisional Artillery in Egypt. As the AIF was being vastly expanded, the artillery staffs of the Fourth and Fifth Divisions had the monumental task of increasing the number of batteries from 18 to 60. Thornthwaite was among a nucleus of experienced artillery men who would gather and train volunteers from the infantry and the Light Horse.

Promoted Major on 26 May 1916, he sailed from Alexandria for France a month later. News of his Military Cross — ‘for distinguished service in the field’ — had come through at the beginning of June. Among those who noticed and wrote personally to congratulate him on the MC ‘which your good service has so thoroughly well earned for you’, was General Birdwood with the 1st ANZAC Corps. ‘We shall be very glad to see the artillery of your division with us here,’ Birdwood wrote, ‘and I am quite sure it will do just as well as the old artillery we had with us on the Peninsula.’

In France, Thornthwaite could reasonably hope for rather better outcomes than were possible on Gallipoli, where guns and ammunition were in short supply and the terrain frustrated the siting of the howitzers and the flat-trajectory 18-pounder batteries. The gunners had learned valuable lessons summarised by a thoughtful modern scholar:

…the importance of camouflage; the value of counterbattery fire; the use of aerial observation; the relative merits of high explosive and shrapnel; and, most important of all, the need for centralised command and control of the guns.

Soon in action at the battle of Fromelles, Thornthwaite endured the bitter winter of 1916–17 on the Somme, successively in the 15th and 13th Field Artillery Brigades, and the 5th Divisional Artillery Headquarters. He was evacuated sick to England at the end of February 1917. Transferred first to Fort Pitt Hospital at Chatham, he was soon moved to the Earl and Countess of Darnley’s Cobham Hall at Gravesend. A South Australian officer who arrived at Cobham Hall a few weeks earlier described the scene for his parents:

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6 Sir W. R. Birdwood to Thornthwaite, 4 June 1916, Thornthwaite MSS.

It is a fine old country house, and the owner, Lord Darnley, has handed over to the Australian Imperial Forces one wing of the building and the use of grounds as a convalescent home. You may remember, although it was before my time, that the Hon. Ivo Bligh took over a famous English cricket team to Australia, which I believe wiped the floor with the Australians. He married an Australian girl. They are the present Earl and Countess of Darnley. The ground floor of the wing the officers are in is the banqueting-room, and the floor above the ballroom. I am in the ballroom, where there are about 30 beds. The whole place is hung with valuable old paintings. I am sitting under a picture now which was painted by Rubens and is insured for £10,000. This portion of the building is the newest and was built I think in 1801, the oldest portion, having been built in the 15th century. Lord and Lady Darnley are still using the house, but are at present in London, so I have not met them yet. The district also is historical, inasmuch as Charles Dickens lived in and wrote much about this part of Kent. There is a little hotel in the village of Cobham called the Leather Bottle Inn, which figures prominently in Pickwick Papers. If Dickens were still alive he would, no doubt, write a book about the old chap who keeps it now.

The Darnleys had made space for 50 officers in their state rooms to be administered as an AIF hospital. The Countess, formerly Florence Morphy, daughter of the Beechworth Police Magistrate, helped in the nursing of the wounded, and bore a large share of the expenses. ‘Lord Darnley and I help in every way we can by giving comforts — vegetables, fruit, milk, tobacco, etc. to these brave fellows’, she would tell an Australian correspondent.\(^8\) It was no hardship to return there after being gassed in November 1917 and again in August 1918. Still less for Thornthwaite to be able to tell his cricket-loving friend Geoff Street that he had stayed in the luxurious company of the aristocratic couple whose mantelpiece was adorned by the already legendary Ashes urn. It was the beautiful music teacher, Florence Morphy, who had won Ivo Bligh’s heart when the English cricketers sailed to Australia in 1892 intent on winning back the recently lamented ‘ashes’ of English cricket; she had been present when he was jestingly presented with an ash-filled urn at a Christmas Eve party, and the couple were married just over a year later.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) *The Argus*, 1 March 1917.

Cobham Hall, seat of the Earl of Darnley, who had dedicated a wing as a hospital for Australian officers. Thornthwaite was admitted ‘suffering from mild illness (not yet diagnosed)’ in March 1917; and again after being gassed in November 1917 and August 1918

(Courtesy Kent Photo Archive, Medway Council)

After a recuperative spell, Major Thornthwaite was back in France in May, commanding the 50th Battery, 5th Division, AIF. As H. J. Manning records, he served with the 50th Battery at Morchies, facing the Hindenburg Line until the beginning of July.

Then, while the Australian infantry was completing its training in the back areas as a prelude to participation in the Third Battle of Ypres, the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisional Artilleries were moved up to the Ypres Salient to help support British divisions in the opening phases of this great offensive…The British and Australian batteries, crowded on to the Ypres flats, had to fire from almost naked positions, and the sufferings of the drivers and the gunners were, in general, beyond any in their previous experience, and their casualties such as they had never before suffered…

Thornthwaite’s battery was emplaced 1,000 yards forward from the Menin Gate, covering the right of the 15th (Scottish) Division. The initial
attack was fairly successful, but then the rain started and it continued to pour…turning the churned up battlefield into a morass into which men and animals simply floundered.¹⁰

Charlie Gatliiff, a 35-year-old Lieutenant with the 50th Battery, provides an admiring glimpse of Major Thornthwaite and his environment in letters to his parents on 16 and 19 September 1917:

We have a very strong combination of officers in this battery now — Major Thornthwaite MC, who was Brigade Major for our Div. Arty for a long time & for a little while was B.C. for the 51st, is our B.C. & it would be hard to find a better one — he belongs to our permanent forces, is a good gunner & administrator & has a nice personality.

In a brief interval out of the line in France, Thornthwaite’s men were:

Situated right on the banks of a canal — billets & horse lines close together — with a large wood on a hill close behind us. The country is all green & is very picturesque & the view from the window of our officers’ mess is rather typical of Australia.

Frank Thornthwaite, away from the guns
(Courtesy of Inez Thornthwaite)

A month later it was a very different world in Belgium — worse, Gatliff said, than the Somme: ‘‘no bon pour soldat’’ & winter hasn’t started.’’

Thornthwaite was slightly wounded in August 1917 but remained on duty until caught (for the second time) in a German gas attack in November. After 10 days he returned to the line. Ypres — Frezenberg Ridge, Westhoer Ridge, Passchendaele, Broodseine, Messines — the names he recorded in the form he was later asked to complete for the Australian War Records Section, would resonate a century later. It was an unremittingly exhausting and nerve-wracking regime. Rare meetings with Geoff Street on Pompey Elliot’s 15th Victorian Brigade staff were among the few pleasant diversions.

The young artillery officer had impressed his superiors. In November 1917 he was mentioned in despatches for the third time, on this occasion by Sir Douglas Haig. He was given temporary command of an artillery brigade for six weeks before being sent to England to a senior artillery officers’ school at Shoeburyness. Back in France at the end of January 1918, he was with the 50th battery again for a few weeks before being transferred to command the 5th Divisional Ammunition Column.

Periodically his parents, who moved from Sydney to Melbourne in 1916 and back to Sydney again in 1918, were relieved and gratified to receive official letters telling them of Frank’s latest awards and mentions of his ‘distinguished and gallant services’ in despatches. Captain Thornthwaite had appeared alongside Colonels John Monash and Brudenell White, Captain Bean, the war correspondent, and others in General Monro’s April 1916 despatch about service on Gallipoli. Monro’s ANZAC list was not published till July 1916 because, as the press reports enigmatically noted, of the ‘miscarriage of the Australian portion which had been abroad for verification’.12

By mid-1916 Frank Thornthwaite had a brother in uniform. The Thornthwaites’ second son, Ralph, had left his job as a foreman in an explosives factory in July 1915 to enlist as a bombardier. Ralph sailed from Australia in May 1916 and, after six months at Larkhill Camp, proceeded with the 8th Field Artillery Brigade to France. He was soon transferred to the 3rd Divisional Ammunition Column, and came through the war unscathed. Late in 1918 he had reverted to gunner at his own request in order to gain experience of gunnery in a battery.13 News of Ralph, who like his father now professed to be a member of the Catholic Apostolic church, was good. Less happily, in March 1918, the Thornthwaites at home read Frank’s name in a list of wounded published in the Sydney Evening News. They had not received any official notification. It was, the Army’s base

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13 NAA: B2455, B884 S68525 THORNTHWAITE RALPH.
records office, said, ‘a Press error for which this Department is not responsible’. As friends had been telephoning to find out about their son, they made enquiries and discovered that the Army was right. The newspaper was publishing lists that were months old.

**Life changes**

As the war reached its climax, Major Thornthwaite was in the final Somme offensives including Villers-Bretonneux, the attack and capture of Peronne, and the advance to the Hindenburg Line. By then, more prayers than ever before were being offered for his safety. He had met, courted, and was engaged to Inez Currie who had been working as a ward VAD in a Red Cross hospital in Mayfair. Inez was a daughter of the Western District aristocracy. In 1898 her father, John Lang Currie Jr, had inherited the homestead portion of his father’s ‘Larra’ property near Camperdown which the pioneer family had been farming for over 50 years. With the associated properties, ‘Gala’ (leased and then bought by Edwin Currie) and ‘Titanga’, the Currie holdings were among the most valuable in western Victoria. Inez, John’s only child, had come to Europe and England with her mother in May 1914. Aged 17, she revelled in a summer of sight-seeing, visits to friends in Oxford and Cambridge, and theatre, parties, and dances in London. The ‘ripping’ times recorded in her diary included Ascot for the Gold Cup, Hendon for flying displays, and the trooping of the colours. A golfing and bathing holiday with family friends at Cruden Bay in Scotland was enlivened by a fascinating new acquaintance, Tryggve Gran, the young Norwegian polar explorer and ski instructor to the Antarctic expedition led by Robert Falcon Scott. Now an aviator, Gran was about to attempt the first flight across the North Sea. When cinema-photographers arrived to record Gran’s preparations and test flights in his Blériot XI-2 monoplane, Inez and another girl were enlisted to present him with British and Norwegian flags. She would look forward to seeing herself in ‘the halls’ at the side of the intrepid airman. A few weeks later she and her mother would know for themselves the elation of the air as they were flown up and down Lake Windermere.

Inez Currie had been struck by how many people she knew had been in Britain for the summer. Alice Ryan and her 22-year-old daughter Maie were much in evidence. Alex Russell became a frequent companion. In Edinburgh she bumped into Peggy Forrester ‘in great form’. The Curries, mother and daughter, would see almost every play and musical comedy of the season, and Inez

particularly admired performances of *Pygmalion* with Mrs Patrick Campbell and Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree; *La Bohème* with Melba and Caruso; and the Russian Ballet at Drury Lane. The Futurist paintings at the Doré Gallery had to be seen but were ‘mad, quite mad’. Apart from the portraits and water colours, the Royal Academy paintings were ‘rotten’. But she loved the Turners and Corots at the National Gallery, and lots of ‘old friends’ at the Tait, ‘ones I have seen copies of from earliest infancy.’ An endless succession of social engagements and sophisticated entertainment was increasingly bemusing for the pastoralist’s daughter. ‘What is it I want, oh, I don’t know,’ Inez confessed to her diary, ‘life is an awful puzzle & I don’t quite know how to start & work it all out.’ Exactly a month later the German invasion of Belgium would supply an answer to the bad attacks of ‘discontents’ and the ‘blues’. ‘Mother says I do nothing but buy papers and read her awful things.’

Within weeks of the outbreak of war, all Inez’s male Australian friends were volunteering. Alex Russell was soon in uniform. Ivo Whitton, the brilliant young golfer, was returning to Australia to enlist in the AIF. Although there were fears about the safety of sea travel, and it took some time to secure passages, Alice Currie and Inez, urged by her cousin Gyp, set sail for home on R. M. S. *Orontes* on October 9. Somewhere in the Indian Ocean, as *Orontes* steamed on towards Australia, the AIF’s First Division Artillery with Lieutenant Frank Thornthwaite, was en route to Egypt in the *Argyllshire*. Among her relatives, friends, and neighbours no family was untouched by the war. Sons and brothers, cousins, uncles, even fathers, were rushing to the colours. No sooner had she reached home than Inez was in conversation with Esther Fairbairn, whose brother Jim at Geelong Grammar was determined to get to England to join his older brother Osborne in the Royal Flying Corps. Anxious to ‘do their bit’, the young Currie girls, with Esther Fairbairn and Catherine Austin, raised over £1000 by subscription early in 1915 for the purchase in London for the Red Cross of two ‘Western District Motor Ambulances’. Inez herself was a whirlwind of charitable endeavour, organising a concert and auction for the Belgian Relief Fund, donating personally and publicly to the British Red Cross Society Australian branch and the Victorian Red Cross Fund for Sick and Wounded Soldiers. By the second year of hostilities, both Inez and Gyp Currie were in London with Esther Fairbairn making their own contribution to the war effort.

Inez had enrolled with the Red Cross in April 1916 for training in first aid and home nursing, hygiene, and cookery. She spent a week in August 1916 at the Red Cross’s Marylebone Auxiliary Hospital, a small private home in Weymouth Street, before finding a more congenial berth in the ‘Australian room’ at the Coulter

15 Inez Currie’s diary, 3, 11, 12 July, 3 Aug. 1914, courtesy the Hon. Tony Street.
Hospital in Grosvenor Square. Founded by an American psychic, Mrs Charlotte Herbine, and run by titled socialites, the Coulter’s 85 or 90 beds were filled with seriously wounded men.\textsuperscript{17} Praise for its open-air ward, ‘where wounded men get full benefit of the air’, tapered off as patients began to complain about cold and exposure. The Australian connection of the hospital was nourished by the assistant commandant, the Hon. Mrs Cyril Ward, the wealthy Dutch-born sister-in-law of the pre-war Governor-General, Lord Dudley. Before her marriage Irene, better known as ‘Daisy’, Ward, was the Baroness de Brienen. She had accompanied her husband, a career naval officer, during his Australian posting as ADC to his brother. Daisy’s other life as a lover of \textit{The Times} military correspondent Colonel Charles À Court Repington, and informal intelligence gatherer in the Netherlands, was a world apart from the circles of the young Australian VAD. So, too, was the political and literary domain of the honorary secretary of the hospital, Lady Juliet Duff. ‘Juliet’, Charles Repington recorded in January 1917, ‘said everything went back to love, even in her conversations with Cabinet Ministers.’ A year later she would confide: ‘that she cannot fall in love with anybody while she has hospital accounts to do’\textsuperscript{18}. Inez could glimpse the social stratosphere if not the romantic challenges of her superiors; but her head was not in the clouds and, when at last the carnage ended, she had every intention of returning home to Australia.

\section*{Towards home}

It was not long before Inez was introduced by her cousin Gyp’s fiancé, Geoff Street, to his friend Frank Thornthwaite, then attending a senior officers’ school at Shoeburyness at the mouth of the river Thames. When Gyp Currie married Street in mid-1918, Frank and Inez, now his fiancée, were best man and bridesmaid. Frank’s respite in London was brief. In October 1918 he was supporting the Americans at Bohain, Le Cateau, and along the Sambre Canal. After commanding the 14\textsuperscript{th} Field Brigade, he was in command of the 12\textsuperscript{th} Field Brigade (in the place of Brigadier General H. W. ‘Bertie’ Lloyd) when the war ended, and was promoted Lieutenant Colonel five days after the armistice.


In the closing weeks of the war Thornthwaite had been working once again with Brudenell White. On his own staff during the last phase of hostilities was Major Eric Campbell who, with Bertie Lloyd, was later to achieve notoriety as the founder and deputy commander respectively of the Sydney-based patriotic anti-communist group, the New Guard.

The first order of business in London when the guns were silenced was marriage. With Geoff and Gyp Street at their side, Frank and Inez were married on 23 November 1918. They had just a week together before Frank returned to France. It was to be another four months before they were reunited for the voyage back to Australia. Inez would travel with her husband in a troopship, together with what she was to describe as ‘a boat-load of married and single diggers’ wives’.
The problem of how to ship home the spouses and children of the ‘colonial contingents’, some 20 000 of them Australian, had been exercising the Ministry of Shipping for months before the end of the war. One of the ministry’s senior men, Archibald Elford, had calculated the number of ships and voyages required to get all the Dominion troops and their dependents home.19 It was up to General Monash’s demobilisation team to determine the priorities for release and arrangements for discipline on board. For the Thornthwaites’ passage, Frank

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was to be the CO, and his adjutant was the former journalist and stockbroker, Captain Stan Ricketson DSM, soon to be in business partnership with the young Melbourne barrister Robert Menzies.

Nothing in France or Flanders could have prepared Thornthwaite and Ricketson for the extraordinary social dislocations and distinctions of the seven-week voyage to Sydney across the Atlantic and the Pacific in a surrendered German liner renamed H.M.A.T. Wahehe. Inez Thornthwaite, leaving the elegant environs of a Knightsbridge apartment opposite Hyde Park, would never forget the distraught wives detached at the last moment from their husbands, childless couples allocated separate accommodation in different classes, segregation of shell-shocked troops and victims of venereal disease (discreetly housed behind a sign ‘which does not indicate its purpose’), alternating blankets of listlessness and frenetic gambling and drinking on pay-days. Shortly after they departed from Tilbury for Torquay, Teneriffe, and points south and west on May 10, Lieutenant Colonel Thornthwaite, as OC Troops, wrote the first editorial for The Wahehe Times. The ‘Ship’s general Nuisance’ as its sub-title advertised, was priced threepence with proceeds to go to the Soldiers’ Widows and Orphans Fund. Readers were reminded that it was the first paper on a ship making its maiden voyage ‘and which the Hun intended using as a transport to convey troops for his projected invasion of England and at the end of the War as one of his means of capturing the world trade’.

‘Of course,’ Inez wrote many years later, ‘most of the troops got drunk in Capetown and it took days to get them all rounded up again.’ In addition to the demands of morale and discipline for the OC troops, a full program of entertainment and sport would keep both of the Thornthwaites on duty every day: dances on the promenade deck, performances by the Wahehe Pierrots, cricket matches (engineers v machine gunners, officers v sergeants, officers v engineers, First Saloon Ladies v Second Saloon ladies, officers v First Saloon Ladies), tug-o’-war (the engineers and machine gunners fought out the ‘pull off’). They took in good part the occasional jibe in the gossip column, ‘They Say’. The OC Troops had, it was said, ‘graciously allowed the Ladies an issue of Guinness every day. Is it true??’ the columnist mused. ‘That the Ladies who do not require same may pass it on to their husbands. I wonder — ?’

For the Thornthwaites it was a relief to be home, disembarking in Sydney on 1 July 1919 along with 86 men and 64 women. Inez had become pregnant.

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23 I follow here the list published in the Sydney press, noting that it is inconsistent with Thornthwaite's Army personnel file that has him disembarking in Melbourne on June 28 at ‘3 MD’ (the Australian Military Forces Third Military District).
on the honeymoon and the baby was expected two months after the couple reached Australia. Alas, there were complications; tragedy not joy awaited them. On July 25 a little boy arrived, some six weeks prematurely. William Currie Thornthwaite lived just four days. He was buried in Lismore cemetery close by the Currie family home. Frank and Inez would never again have children.

Returning to Australia with his wife, decorated with the DSO and Croix de Guerre, as well as the MC earned on Gallipoli, and four mentions in despatches, Thornthwaite was discharged from the AIF in September 1919. Like many of his contemporaries who had survived the war, he had been the beneficiary of the enormous expansion of the Australian military forces. He had seized the opportunities created by the massive growth of the artillery arm and served with distinction. Many of his contemporaries could not wait to get out of uniform and enjoy a civilian existence. But he was a soldier and wanted a soldier’s life. He re-joined the permanent Army. He was posted to the First Battery, RAFA, in Sydney. Then came an unforeseen interruption to the career he had chosen. Following the Washington Disarmament Conference in 1922 and the Commonwealth government’s decision to reduce the permanent staff of the Army, he joined 71 of his rather more reluctant contemporaries on the half-pay
list, and shortly afterwards on the unattached list. It gave some small hope of recall to active service that he was placed on the reserve of officers on 1 July 1927.24

Still in his early 30s, Thornthwaite now had to make a new life. Though he had little experience of the land he felt he could learn what he needed to know to succeed as a grazier. He was not, as was suggested by H. J. Manning many years

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later, distressed by having to leave the Army. Inez was undeniably happy to be returning to the station life of her youth. And there was never going to be any financial hardship. Frank went as a jackaroo to the famous Riverina merino stud Wanganella Station, where he enjoyed the tutelage of the redoubtable Otway Falkiner. A year later he bought a 9800-acre property, ‘Marong’, at nearby Conargo, some 30 kilometres north of Deniliquin, and over 700 kilometres southwest of Sydney. He and Inez ran the property, with the aid of a married couple and one boundary rider. They ‘loved the district and the life’, Inez said, having ‘a lot of fun’ with their horses and successfully entering picnic race meetings.

Frank had never taken any part in RSL activities and eschewed local government. Approached late in 1930 by the Country Party to consider standing for Riverina in the House of Representatives, he wrote to Inez’s friend Charles Hawker for advice. He did not feel ‘at all fitted for such a job’. Could he manage the property as well as fulfil parliamentary duties? To do the job well, how much more than the salary might it cost? More seriously, although all his interests were in the country, he doubted if he ‘agreed altogether with the tenets of the Country Party’. He wondered if the National Party might again contest the seat.

Hawker’s response confirmed him in the belief he had already been coming to: that he would not be able to cope with the constant travelling. ‘I am not a particularly strong man — the knocking about of the war seems to have left its mark on me and both Inez and I think that I should never stand it.’ There were other ways in which a gentleman farmer could contribute to community affairs. He took an active interest in the Southern Riverina Graziers’ Association, joined the council in 1935, and was re-elected in 1936 with Brudenell White. After the death in 1935 of Inez’s father John Lang Currie, the Thornthwaites sold their farm and 4700 merino ewes and moved to Victoria, to the Currie family’s ‘Larra’ at Derrinallum. There they were neighbours of Jim and Peggy Fairbairn across the lake at Mount Elephant.

Frank had been elected a member of the Melbourne Club on his return from the war; and Sydney’s Union Club had welcomed him as well. He was nominated for the Melbourne Club by the recently knighted Sir Charles Ryan, who had been on Birdwood’s staff at Gallipoli before becoming consulting surgeon to the medical headquarters staff in London and then honorary surgeon-general of the Australian Military Forces. The father of Inez’s friend Maie, still seven years from marrying Dick Casey, Ryan was an influential sponsor. But no more so than Frank’s seconder, Frederick Fairbairn, Jim Fairbairn’s uncle, who had

25 Thornthwaite to Hawker, 7 and 22 Nov. 1930, Hawker MSS, NLA MS 4848/2/4.
headed the Australian Red Cross in London while Inez was serving there. Frank’s appearance in the new edition of *Who’s Who in Australia*, published in 1935 after an interval of seven years, acknowledged the position in society he had acquired.

The polo-playing colonel and his wife, a tireless supporter of local charities and services like baby-health centres, as well as special occasions like a Flemington Oaks Day luncheon with her friend Mrs Neville Fairbairn Armitage, regularly made the social pages. In town for Cup Week in 1938, *The Argus* reported many of the Western District set stayed at the Hotel Windsor. But the Thornthwaites, endowed with the inexhaustible wealth of the Curries, had their own flat in the Melbourne Mansions, 99 Collins Street. Admittedly, a house-warming party in November 1938 at ‘Gala’, Lismore, which boasted a private links golf course, sounded a little more glamorous than it was. The Gala Golf Club course, on which Frank competed for the H. O. Nevet Cup in June 1939, wound its way through paddocks on Inez’s uncle’s property; the club house was an old tin shed with a stone fireplace, a gravel floor, and rough wooden tables and benches. Nevertheless, regularly reported events like this, and a farewell to the Alex Russells and the Ford Guthries who were about to sail to England, saw an assemblage of Fairbairns, Streets, Curries, Chirnsides, and others that confirmed Frank and Inez Thornthwaite’s place at the heart of the Victorian aristocracy.27

**Intimations of war**

Though he made a success of farming, Frank Thornthwaite’s heart was never divorced from the military life. He weathered the years of Depression and low wool prices and could be optimistic about the future. But the resurgent menace of Germany troubled him. Seeing Hitler’s world first hand in 1936, after a pilgrimage to the European cemeteries and battlefields he had known so well 20 years earlier, his concern was heightened. Touring the Rhineland by car shortly after it had been re-occupied, he saw hundreds of young Germans marching with shovels on their shoulders, ‘quite obviously drilling’. Inez would remember that he remarked almost every day that he felt certain war would come again in two or three years. Unhappy that his service training and knowledge had been so long neglected, he turned his mind to national defence. He wrote ‘arresting and practical’ articles on Australian military needs.

When his dearest friend Geoff Street ascended to Cabinet as Minister for Defence in the Lyons government late in 1938, it could only be a matter of time before a way was found to bring Frank Thornthwaite back into the Army fold. Seven

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months later, on 1 July 1939, he reported for duty as a General Staff Officer, 3rd grade in the Chief of the General Staff’s branch. He was raised to 2nd grade and a major’s pay on September 2. On November 1, he completed a mobilisation attestation form at Sturt Street, South Melbourne, a short walk from Victoria Barracks. In April 1940 he was appointed GSO to the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Major General John Northcott. Northcott had been invalided out of action for most of the previous war but the two men had spent weeks in each other’s company in 1937 when they sailed across the Pacific together with their wives on the Aorangi.

Within months, Frank had been poached by the new Chief of the General Staff Sir Brudenell White. White was well acquainted with Thornthwaite’s ability and record of achievement. The fact that his friend was connected by marriage to the Minister for Defence, and was close to Rutherford Guthrie, and to others like Jim and Osborne Fairbairn, the Alex Russells, and the Chester Manifolds, in the interlocking family networks of the Western District, gave assurance to those who mattered that he was a sound man. Moreover, White knew that Frank Thornthwaite was more than sound. He had ideas and could express them. His own connections, too, were useful. A fellow wartime artillery commander, Bertie Lloyd, was recalled to active duty as Deputy Adjutant General at Army Headquarters on 1 August 1940.

In a very short time Thornthwaite himself had been noticed by the Prime Minister. Newspapers had reported on his attachment to Army intelligence and his attendance as an adviser at War Cabinet meetings.28 When the Cabinet was due to meet again in Canberra on August 13 he would as always accompany his chief, Brudenell White. Fairbairn’s assistant private secretary, Murray Tyrrell, was thought to be arranging the final allocation of seats for the flight to Canberra. When Pip Hayter, Geoff Street’s private secretary, was told on the afternoon of August 12 that he had to get White on to the plane, he telephoned Tyrrell at his office in Victoria Barracks. Tyrrell takes up the story:

Pip…said ‘Look Murray, I know it’s late but I want a seat on your aircraft in the morning’…And I said I hadn’t got one. He said ‘Well Menzies has called a Cabinet meeting for ten [sic] o’clock tomorrow. He wants the Chief of the General Staff there.’ And I said ‘Well, if it’s that important, it’s immaterial to me. I’ll go in the train tonight.’ My bag was alongside my desk, you see. ‘And Brudenell White can have my seat.’ And Pip said ‘Well, thank you very much. I’m sure the minister will appreciate that.’

28 According to the Courier-Mail and Townsville Bulletin, 30 April 1940, Thornthwaite of ‘the army intelligence section’ was among senior officers present as advisors at a War Cabinet meeting on 29 April 1940, which discussed defence measures in light of European and Middle Eastern developments, and received a report on communist penetration of the AIF and militia.
With that, Tyrrell rang his wife, Nell, and told her he would not be home as he was going to catch the train to Canberra. An hour later, Hayter rang again:

‘Menzies wants the chief of intelligence, Thornthwaite. Can you give him a seat in the aircraft?’ I said ‘I’ve told you, Pip, the bloody thing’s full. I’ve given up my seat.’ And I said ‘If he’s got to go you’re the next junior on the sheet. You give him your seat.’ Pip said ‘Oh, come off it.’ I said ‘All right, you’re the most junior left, off you go.’ He said ‘Well, when you’re booking your passage on the train tonight will you book me too?’ So Pip and I came to Canberra on the train, and I put Thornthwaite on.30

Bearing a briefcase with the papers that the CGS needed to assimilate before the next day’s meetings in Canberra with the other Service chiefs and the War Cabinet, Frank Thornthwaite was driven from his Melbourne Mansions apartment to join the group at Essendon waiting for Lockheed Hudson A16-97. Cheery as always, and recognisable by his uniform to RAAF personnel on the tarmac as a colonel on the staff, he boarded the aircraft and looked for a seat near his chief.

29 Thornthwaite had been ‘required’ at ‘AHQ M. I.’ in Oct. 1939 (NAA: B884, V159753). Tyrrell to Lord Casey, 24 Oct. 1972, shows him guessing that Thornthwaite was chief of intelligence (NAA: M1129 WHITE/C B).
30 Sir Murray Tyrrell, interview, 5 April 1977. The Examiner (14 Aug. 1940) reported Hayter’s ‘protest’ at being bumped from the flight.