Chapter 4
Second World War

Here war is simple like a monument:
A telephone is speaking to a man;
Flags on a map assert that troops were sent;
A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan

For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
And can be lost and are, and miss their wives,
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.

But ideas can be true although men die,
And we can watch a thousand faces
Made active by one lie:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking. Dachau.

Here war is Simple

W.H. Auden

There was no single cause of the Second World War. It was a series of events and developments around the world that came together inexorably, until disaster eventually erupted. The myth of the First World War being the 'War to end all wars' was exploded – but there can be no doubt that the Treaty of Versailles - motivated more by revenge on Germany rather than sympathy toward it following defeat - was a major cause.

The Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919. It codified the peace terms between the victorious Allies and Germany. It required Germany (and its allies) to accept full responsibility for all the loss and damage caused by the First World War. It required the disarmament of Germany, as well as harsh territorial concessions and the payment of massive reparations. The treaty humiliated Germany while failing to resolve the underlying issues that had led to the war in the first place. The economist, John Maynard Keynes - a British delegate to the Paris Peace Conference - predicted that the treaty was too harsh and the reparation figures too excessive and counter-productive. On the other hand, prominent figures on the Allied side, criticized the treaty for being too lenient on Germany.

Germany's resentment of the treaty was exploited by Adolf Hitler during the rise of the Nazi Party in the 1930s. He asserted that Germany had not lost the war but, rather, it had been betrayed by the Weimar Republic who negotiated an unnecessary surrender. Germans viewed the treaty as a humiliation and, with nationalistic fervour, they eagerly listened to Hitler's oratory which blamed the treaty for all of Germany's ills. Hitler's promises to reverse the depredations of the Allied powers and recover Germany's lost territory and pride, was a significant factor in the onset of the Second World War.

Another major contributor to the Second World War was the Great Depression. It worsened the collapse of the German economy. Though the Treaty of Versailles may not have caused the crash, it became a convenient scapegoat for the Nazis. The depression was world-wide, causing economies to shrink and limiting trade between nations. Unemployment was high, banks failed, prices fell and businesses closed. The people of Germany turned to the messianic political message of Hitler, placing their hopes on his promises to make Germany great again.

This was an era of totalitarianism. European and other democratic nations were transfixed by a fear of Communism which had arisen out of the Russian Revolution. In Germany and Italy, the future appeared to be a form of militaristic totalitarianism known by its Italian name, Fascism. It

promised to provide for the needs of the people more effectively than democracy, and presented itself as a certain defence against Communism. Benito Mussolini established the first Fascist dictatorship during the inter-war period in Italy in 1922. It is a myth that he got the trains to run on time. Mussolini's rise to power had been founded on publicity. He might have had bizarre policies and looked like a comedic figure to later generations, but he knew what worked when it came to getting attention, and his propaganda was strong. Mussolini picked on the rail industry as something to show how his supposedly dynamic rule had improved Italian life. But in truth, there was only minimal improvement in Italian railways but a huge suppression of liberalism and individual civil rights.

Benito Mussolini – the first Fascist dictator – and Adolf Hitler - 1943.

Hitler's ruthless rise to power was fuelled by Germany's nationalistic ambitions. He made military pacts with Italy and Japan (known as the Axis) and stealthily expanded Germany's military forces and war arsenal. In 1936, Hitler moved troops into the German speaking areas of the Rhineland (in France), Austria and Czechoslovakia without any resistance, because neither Britain nor France had the military resources to resist. This move heartened the huge following of the Nazis in Germany and strengthened its resolve for war.

Great Britain and France had been pursuing a policy of appeasement with Hitler. The sight of the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, brandishing a piece of paper – the Munich Peace Agreement of 1938 – is an iconic image in history. It was proven to be worthless. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain cuts a sad figure in history. He fought doggedly to prevent war and in doing so, delayed its outbreak for a couple of years. Some historians have taken a more favourable perspective of Chamberlain and his policies - by arguing that going to war with Germany in 1938 would have been even more disastrous as the UK was totally unprepared.

His conduct of the war was heavily criticised by members of all parties in the British Parliament and, in a vote of confidence, his government's majority was greatly reduced. Accepting that a national government supported by all the main parties was essential, Chamberlain resigned the prime-ministership because the Labour and Conservative parties would not serve under his leadership. Although he still led the Conservative Party, he was succeeded as Prime Minister by his colleague, Winston Churchill.

Chamberlain's reputation remains controversial among historians, the initial high regard for him being eroded for failing to prepare Britain for war. Most historians in the generation following Chamberlain's death held similar views. Chamberlain is still unfavourably ranked amongst British Prime Ministers.

Neville Chamberlain declaring peace in our time through the Munich Peace Agreement.

In August 1939, Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin signed a non-aggression pact which further alarmed Great Britain and France. Hitler had long planned an invasion of Poland, a nation to which Great Britain and France had guaranteed military support if it were attacked by Germany. The pact meant that Germany could invade Poland unopposed without facing a war on two fronts. On the other hand, Stalin was buying time so that Russia could build up its war machinery without waging war against Germany. They also made an agreement on how they would later divide up Eastern Europe. The pact fell apart in June 1941 when Nazi forces launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union.

Britain and France's attempts to appease Germany by agreeing to Germany entering some parts of Czechoslovakia as agreed in the peace agreement of 1938 was flouted when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Hitler was under the misapprehension that he could march into Poland with impunity. He had been playing brinksmanship with Britain and France and he believed that they would bow to his bluff. However, it was this act that caused Britain and France to declare war on Germany. Hitler was shocked. As was the case in the First World War, Australia automatically became involved as a member of the British Commonwealth.

On the other side of the world, Japan too was hit badly by the economic depression. Like Germany, Japan had a strong, militaristic tradition of warrior culture. The Japanese people had lost faith in the government and they looked to the army to find a solution to their problems. Japan was hungry for mineral and oil resources and their military class had ambitions of ousting the US as the major power in the Pacific.

The Japanese had already begun imperial expansion in Manchuria (1931), Inner Mongolia (1936), and China (1937). China was rich in oil and minerals and Japan needed these resources to build up its war machinery. China sought international help from the League of Nations in resisting the Japanese invasion but it was ignored.

The Empire of Japan entered the Second World War on 27 September 1940, by signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. It further expanded its territory by the invasion of French Indo-China (Vietnam) in September 1940. The US was concerned about the security of its Pacific territories and strengthened its naval fleet which was stationed at Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. Japan, realising that its expansion in the Pacific could be threatened by this move by the US, attacked

Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 aiming to destroy the US fleet at one fell swoop. For seven hours on that same day, there were coordinated Japanese attacks on the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island,[1] the Dutch East Indies,[2] Thailand, Borneo, Malaya and Hong Kong. The strategic goals of the Japanese offensive were to cripple the US Pacific fleet, capture the oil fields in the Dutch East Indies, and maintain their sphere of influence over China, East Asia, and Korea. It was also to expand the outer reaches of the Japanese Empire to create a formidable defensive perimeter around the newly acquired territory.

The bombing of Pearl Harbour was a critical turning point in the war. America declared war on Japan immediately but not on Germany. In fact, it was Hitler who declared war on America on 11 December 1941. He thought that Japan would support Germany by attacking Russia but this did not eventuate. This was a catastrophic blunder on Hitler's part as it created a grand alliance of nations – America, Britain and Russia – which was eventually to bring powerful offensives from both the east and west to defeat the Nazi forces in Europe.

USS *Arizona* sinking during the attack on Pearl Harbour.

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[1] A tiny atoll in Micronesia occupied by American forces.
[2] The Dutch East Indies was often referred to as NEI (Netherlands East Indies) and is now Indonesia. Likewise, New Guinea was the entire island which has now been split into Irian Jaya (part of Indonesia) and Papua New Guinea. Malaya included Singapore – which is now a separate country – and the remaining part is now Malaysia. Hong Kong is now part of China.

Australia entered the war after Britain's declaration of war on 3 September 1939. By the end of the war, almost a million Australians had served in the armed forces in the European theatre, the North African campaign and the South West Pacific theatre. Australia also came under direct attack for the first time in its post-colonial history. Its casualties from enemy action during the war were 27,000 killed and 24,000 wounded. Many more suffered from tropical disease, hunger, and harsh conditions in captivity. Of the 21,467 Australian prisoners taken by the Japanese only 14,000 survived.

Australia's initial involvement in the Second World War was in Europe and North Africa. The Royal Australian Navy participated in operations against Italy in June 1940 and Australian airmen flew in the Battle of Britain the following August and September. The Australian army was not engaged in combat until 1941, when the 6th, 7th, and 9th Divisions joined Allied operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa.

Following early successes against Italian forces, the Australians suffered defeat with the Allies at the hands of the Germans in Greece, Crete, and North Africa. In June and July 1941 Australians participated in the successful Allied invasion of Syria, a mandate of France and the Vichy government. Up to 14,000 Australians held out against repeated German attacks in the Libyan port of Tobruk, where they were besieged between April and August 1941. After being relieved at Tobruk, the 6th and 7th Divisions departed from the Mediterranean theatre for the war against Japan. The 9th Division remained to play an important role in the Allied victory at El Alamein in October 1942 before it also left for the Pacific. By the end of 1942 the only Australians remaining in the Mediterranean theatre were airmen serving either with 3 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) or in the Royal Air Force (RAF).

From 1942 until early 1944, Australian forces played a key role in the Pacific War, making up the majority of Allied strength throughout much of the fighting in the South West Pacific theatre. While the military was largely relegated to subsidiary fronts from mid-1944, it continued offensive operations against the Japanese until the war ended.

The map below shows places mentioned in the stories of many of the men I write about in *Roads to War* who served in the New Guinea and New Britain campaigns.

Map depicting eastern New Guinea and New Britain - 1944.

The Second World War contributed to major changes in Australia's economy and its military and foreign policy. The war accelerated the process of industrialisation, led to the development of a larger peacetime military force and began the process of Australia shifting the focus of its foreign policy from Britain to the United States. The final effects of the war also contributed to the development of a more diverse and cosmopolitan Australian society through the migration of European refugees.

The war also saw the emergence of women playing vital roles in the war effort. Although nurses accompanied the AIF in 1940, during the early years of the war women were not called on to make any significant contribution. Labour shortages forced the government's hand and, in February 1941, the RAAF established the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF). The RAN also began employing female telegraphists, leading to the establishment of the Women's Royal Australian Naval Service (WRANS) in 1942. The Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) was established in October 1941 and outside the armed services, the Women's Land Army (WLA) was formed to encourage women to work in rural industries. Women in urban areas took up employment in industries, such as munitions production.

Keep them flying! This is a recruiting poster for the WAAAF – 1941.

The Second World War brought new horrors to history. In terms of total dead, about three per cent of the world's population was obliterated – 75 million people. Many people died because of deliberate genocide, mass bombings, massacres, disease and starvation. The concentration camps of the Germans, the prisoner of war camps of the Japanese and the gulags of the Russians saw unimaginable atrocities committed in the name of nation states.

Nazi Germany killed over 11 million people because of their ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, physical/mental condition or religion. This included six million Jews. Up to 10 million Chinese people were enslaved by the Japanese to work in the mines to provide the war materiel for the Japanese. Of the 5.7 million Russian prisoners of war held in Germany, fifty-seven per cent died or were killed.

These awful acts of cruelty driven by insane prejudice, in a perverse way, legitimised the Second World War when compared to others. It would be intolerable to think of what the world may have been like had Hitler succeeded. The disdain for liberal democracy and the parliamentary system by Fascism and Nazism is now widely recognised as immoral and evil. The horror of the Holocaust could never be conceived on any rational basis and the fact that it occurred should never be

forgotten. The period of the Second World War must go down in history as one of the World's darkest periods – in terms of numbers, the darkest of all time.

Although Germany and Japan stole the march on their enemies by preparing early for the war, the mobilization of people, resources and war materiel by the Allies was a critical component of the war effort. After the commencement of the war, the Allies were able to eventually outpace the Axis' war production. America's involvement was key. By the end of the war, US factories had produced 300,000 planes, and by 1944 had produced two-thirds of the Allied military equipment used in the war. Eighteen American shipyards built 2,710 Liberty ships between 1941 and 1945 – an average of three ships every two days.

S.S. *John W. Brown* – one of four surviving Liberty ships photographed in 2000.

The Second World War introduced its own set of innovations. The jeep was one of them. Its name is derived from its initials GP – standing for General Purpose vehicle. It was originally developed in the United States where the government called on manufacturers to submit designs. It had to be light and manoeuvrable, able to carry three people and capable of driving in deep mud and climbing steep slopes. The final design was a hybrid of designs by Ford, Willys-Overland and the American Bantam Car Company.

The jet engine was another innovation but it had little impact on the prosecution of the war. Even though the Germans flew the first jet propelled aircraft in 1939, and the British in 1941, its final

development for combat aircraft came after the war. However, it did terrorise England in the form of buzz-bombs.

The Japanese seized most of the rubber plantations in Asia and the Allies were forced to find alternative materials for tyres as well as for clothing and footwear. America accelerated early research on synthetic rubber and they were able to produce 800,000 tons by 1944.

Radar played a significant role. Systems were installed around England's south and east coasts and during the Battle of Britain in 1940, it enabled the British military early warning of imminent German attacks.

Perhaps the most important innovation to save lives during the war was the development of penicillin. Developed in 1928 by Alexander Fleming, it proved invaluable on the battlefield, fending off infection and hugely increasing survival rates among injured soldiers. The United States manufactured more than two million doses of the drug in preparation for the Normandy landings in 1944.

On 8 May 1945, Germany signed an unconditional surrender to the Allies. Hitler had committed suicide on 30 April during the Battle of Berlin and Germany's surrender was authorised by Hitler's successor, Admiral Karl Dönitz. The war in Europe was over but it still raged in the Pacific.

But the most significant innovation was to end the war. It ended finally with the detonation of two atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki (on 6 and 9 August 1945). They unleashed a power never seen before – not only in the devastation of the explosions themselves but also the long-lasting effects of radiation. The two bombings killed somewhere between 130,000 and 230,000 people, most of whom were civilians[3]. Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, six days after the Soviet Union's declaration of war on Japan. There is still much debate concerning the ethical and legal justification for the bombings. Supporters believe that the atomic bombings were necessary to bring a swift end to the war with minimal casualties, while critics argue that the Japanese government could have been brought to surrender through other means, while highlighting the moral and ethical implications of nuclear weapons and the deaths caused to civilians.

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[3] The American Air Force's fire-bombing of Tokyo on the night of 9/10 March 1945 is the single most destructive bombing raid in history – killing up to 130,000 people and leaving over one million people homeless. The city comprised mostly wooden houses with paper windows.

Hiroshima after the atom bomb blast. The domed building was one of the few that was not flattened and is now a memorial to all of the citizens of Hiroshima who died or were injured.

Now, nine nations have nuclear weapons and the horrendous threat of nuclear war still pervades the world today.