

C.E.W. Bean Foundation Annual Dinner

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Chester Wilmot; War Correspondent, Historian, Interpreter of Worlds

By Paul Kelly

On the morning of Sunday 10 January 1954, BOAC flight 781 took off from Rome's Ciampino Airport bound for Heathrow on the final leg of its flight from Singapore. The plane was the third built of the new Comet 1. It veered west over the Mediterranean but at 10.51 am the aircraft suffered an explosive decompression at altitude.

A group of startled Italian fishermen saw the remnants plunge into the water adjacent to the island of Elba, location of Napoleon's first exile. All passengers and crew were killed. This included an internationally known Australian, the BBC journalist, Reginald William Winchester Wilmot, aged 42, who had been in Australia on assignment.

Wilmot was Melbourne born, captain in his final year at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School, a graduate in arts and law from Melbourne University where he was SRC president and represented in inter-varsity debating. Wilmot was steeped in an Anglo-Australian classical education, wrote part-time for local newspapers, developed a taste for foreign travel and had visited Germany during the Munich crisis. As a young man he had great energy, physical presence and a vibrant voice with what was once called an educated Australian accent.

Wilmot's life was cut short yet his achievements are astonishing. He became a prominent figure in the greatest generation – the generation of my parents that was defined by the Second World War. In a competitive field he was probably the most illustrious Australian correspondent of World War Two, a broadcaster unrivalled in Australia and then Britain, a highly professional journalist who, in a national crisis, became a participant.

He was a man ahead of his time – an Australian patriot yet an internationalist who won fame in reporting on war in three different theatres – Africa, the Pacific and Europe. He learnt quickly and made a transition to which many journalists aspire but few attain: he matured into a formidable historian.

In 1952 Wilmot published his epic, *The Struggle for Europe*. Churchill's memoirs aside, it endured for some years as the finest book written on World War Two. Wilmot changed our understanding of the war with his thesis that flawed military tactics by the United States had allowed the Soviet Union to dominate central-Europe post-war thereby shaping the rest of the twentieth century. The Observer said of his book: "The work of a great historical narrator, holding its place not unworthily by the side of Churchill." His work is dated these days yet it remains a masterpiece. If there is a greater non-fiction book written by an Australian I am yet to discover it.

An hour's ferry ride from the Italian coast, Elba is a former playground of the Etruscans and the Romans. The cemetery is on the southern side of this spectacular island. At one point you drive through a boulevard of eucalyptus trees as fine as ever existed in this country. You pass a sparkling harbour, Porto Azzuro and adjacent to a tiny Etruscan museum is the cemetery. The marble monument stands with its inscription: "In memory of those who lost their lives in an aircraft accident off the island of Elbe 10 January 1954." There are 36 names the third last being "Chester Wilmot". It is a beautiful setting with abundant fresh flowers in the Italian tradition. The afternoon summer sun is intense in an Australian way.

Wilmot worked as an ABC correspondent covering the campaigns in North Africa, Greece, Syria and then Tobruk. With the Japanese threat to Australia he became the ABC's principal correspondent in the Pacific covering the New Guinea campaign. After his confrontation with Allied Land Forces commander, General Sir Thomas Blamey, Wilmot had his accreditation as a war correspondent cancelled by Blamey. Based in Sydney, Wilmot then wrote the first of his two books, *Tobruk 1941*, dedicated to the commander of the Ninth Division "General Morshead and his men." Given that Blamey had terminated his career covering Australian troops, Wilmot accepted an offer by the BBC that led to the decisive chapter in his career: covering from D-Day onwards the advance of the allied armies from the landing at Normandy to the German surrender.

In this talk I want to offer three cameos of Wilmot – at Tobruk, in New Guinea and in Europe. Each reveals a different side of the man. I want to pay tribute to historian, Neil McDonald, who, along with Peter Brune, wrote the excellent 2016 biography of Wilmot "Valiant for Truth" on which I have drawn. We owe a double debt to Neil McDonald since in both this book and in his earlier "Chester Wilmot Reports" he has produced the texts of many of Wilmot's remarkable broadcasts.

The Second World War was a newspaper and radio war. Wilmot's guiding principle was authenticity and being on-the-spot. He said the main task in covering troops was that "you must see the ground over which they have to fight and the positions from which they are fighting, otherwise you have no idea what really happens." This involved risks and took courage. It meant Wilmot knew the ordinary soldiers and developed a remarkable relationship with them. Yet he had the journalist's lust for power – Wilmot developed personal relationships with a number of commanders, won their trust and was taken into their confidences to an extraordinary extent.

So Wilmot operated on both ends of the story – with the men and with the generals.

As Neil McDonald argues the foundations for Wilmot's success lay in his 1941 coverage of the AIF fighting in North Africa, Greece and Crete. This is his description of the soldiers' life in Tobruk: "They have to man their posts and drive their vehicles without windscreens and work on improving their defences, sandstorm or no sandstorms.... Bully, bread and margarine are the basic ration...on 99 days out of 100 there is no beer to be had in Tobruk.... everyone I've asked says if he were given a choice of a beer or a bath he'd choose the bath.... with tea and water you can shake your thirst but unless you can deal with the daily accumulations of dirt, you haven't much chance of holding at bay the army of fleas the Italians left behind them."

The defence of Tobruk fell largely to the Australians under Morshead's command. Wilmot won Morshead's confidence, calling him a "hard, practical commander" yet there were tensions notably over the general's obsession with detail in his censorship of Wilmot's reports before despatch.

Morshead knew from opening days the key to success was to seize the tactical offence by patrolling and dominating no man's land. Wilmot said of Morshead: "He inspired everyone in Tobruk with the firm conviction that there could be no yielding; that if every man fought without flinching the garrison was invincible." Wilmot identified the significance of the successful Australian defence of the fortress during 1941: "Here the Germans suffered their first defeat on land. The Tobruk garrison showed that they could be beaten and how to beat them. It showed that the Blitzkrieg break-through tactics could be defeated by resolute infantry who held their ground, by minefields and artillery fire, by defence in depth and by individual courage."

Wilmot ends his Tobruk book with his broadcast of Morshead unveiling a memorial to the troops left behind: "Here beside the road that runs from Bardia to Tobruk the smooth brown sand of the desert is broken by 800 white crosses and the mounds of 800 graves... In the west the sun has just set but the sky is still streaked with light and a restless wind sweeps a fine dust-cloud across the cemetery. From the escarpment to the south comes the occasional thunder of guns; along the road from time to time trucks, armoured cars and tanks roar past on their way to and from the front; half a mile away troops are shaking out their blankets. This will be a simple ceremony. Here within the sound and range of enemy guns anything elaborate would be out of place. There is to be no display, no pomp and ceremony, no glittering uniforms, no regimental bands, no speeches, just two chaplains in khaki, one bugler and a hundred men... Some of the graves are not yet completed. Some are only mounds of earth ringed with rough rock.

"More than 500 of the men buried here are Australians. ... The drifting sands may sweep across this cemetery and cover these crosses as they have covered the monuments which the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans raised along this barren coast. But the sands neither of the desert nor of time will obscure the splendid achievements of the men of Tobruk. Their real monument is their name and their most honoured resting place is in the grateful hearts of their fellow men."

After returning from the Middle East, Wilmot married Edith Irwin at St Peter's College Chapel in Adelaide. Chester wore his war correspondents' uniform and Edith a tailored suit. Following the Japanese landing in New Guinea, Wilmot arrived in Port Moresby in late July 1942 as ABC correspondent, encountering a military headquarters consumed with delusional confidence. A few days later a seasoned commander, Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell was appointed to command all forces in Papua and New Guinea. Rowell and Wilmot knew each other well; they enjoyed a rare bond from their time together in the Middle East and Greece. Wilmot admired Rowell but distrusted the competence and integrity of Australian Commander, General Blamey.

The Australians were engaged in a desperate fighting withdrawal along the Kokoda Track. Wilmot, with cameraman and photographer, Damien Parer, had made an exhausting trek to the front. As he approached Brigade HQ, Wilmot was passed by the straggling troops of the 39th Militia Battalion now being relieved. His broadcast said: "There are wounded too. They must be going through hell on this track especially those with leg wounds. Some have been hit in the foot and they can't even get a boot on.... Here's a steep pinch and a wounded digger's trying to climb it. You need both hands and feet but he's been hit in the arm and thigh. I say to this fellow he ought to be a stretcher case, but he replies, 'I can get along. There's blokes here lots worse than me and if we don't walk they'll never get out.' The troops forward are holding on, giving them time to get all the wounded out."

Neil McDonald says that while Parer's film *Kokoda Front Line* revealed to authorities and the Australian people the horrific conditions, it was Wilmot's reports that first seeded such awareness. He captured the tragedy of the withdrawal. "Nothing tests troops as much as a withdrawal... you can drive men like this back but you can't conquer them. Neither they nor you want any more talk of 'glorious withdrawals'. That's why I've tried to tell this story simply as I saw it."

In early September 1942 the Australians had suffered further setbacks and the Brisbane HQ of General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of allied forces, became alarmed.

On the night of 17 September MacArthur applied pressure in a conversation with Prime Minister, John Curtin. Although a foreign general, MacArthur had been appointed by the Labor Government as supreme commander of all Australian forces and therefore became Curtin's chief adviser on the war. Bowing to MacArthur, Curtin ordered Blamey to New Guinea. MacArthur told Curtin that Blamey must go in order to "save himself" and "meet his responsibility to the Australian public." Military historian, David Horner, has observed that Blamey's position was now at risk.

Facing this dilemma Blamey took charge of the New Guinea operation and sacked Rowell as commander. Rowell and Wilmot were united in their repudiation of Blamey's action and their belief Blamey's mistakes were central to the military setbacks in New Guinea. In his penetrating observations on the New Guinea campaign over August/September 1942 Wilmot said: "The situation, which resulted in the Japanese getting to within 35 miles of Port Moresby, appears to have been one which should never have arisen if enough troops, adequately trained and equipped, had been sent to New Guinea in time."

This was a critique of Blamey. And Blamey was now gunning for Wilmot whose criticism he could not stomach. Wilmot believed Blamey's determination to censor his reports about the campaign was inspired by personal interest. Rowell and Wilmot met in Sydney on 30 September. Wilmot subsequently had a meeting with Curtin where he attacked Blamey. Professor JDB Miller then a young man in the ABC newsroom saw Wilmot after the meeting. Millar said: "He'd (Wilmot) been to see the Prime Minister..... Curtin had given him a very good hearing but had said of Blamey: "We must either back him or sack him – and we can't sack him."

It was a predictable outcome. Wilmot had been brave, naïve, driven by faith in Rowell and his abiding concern for the war effort. He had crossed the boundary line for a journalist. He was neither the first journalist nor the last to become a participant. I would not criticise him. Wilmot's critique of Blamey had much validity given the decision to reinforce Port Moresby after the Coral Sea battle with forces mainly from poorly trained militia.

On 1 November 1942 Blamey summoned Wilmot to his tent, accused him of undermining his authority as commander and withdrew his credentials thereby terminating Wilmot's career as an Australian correspondent. Wilmot wrote to his father that "I had to choose between doing what I thought was right and risking my job – and doing what I knew to be cowardly."

Wilmot said of Blamey: "In two years I have heard him denounced in the strongest possible terms in messes and private conversations by senior officers who had no interest in supplanting him, by junior officers and by ordinary diggers." Wilmot said the reason Blamey moved against him was Wilmot's criticism of the campaign and that "when I could not get my criticism published I went to the Government."

Facing a highly charged situation the ABC stood by Wilmot as an employee. It did not take a public stand on the Blamey v Wilmot dispute. Charles Bean, after whom this foundation and lecture are named, advised Wilmot at this time. The ABC General Manager, Charles Moses, applied for re-accreditation on Wilmot's behalf. Moses was rebuffed by Blamey. Eventually the BBC offered Wilmot a position with 'War Report' the team of broadcasters assembled to cover the invasion of Europe.

Wilmot would now cover the biggest story on earth for the greatest broadcaster.

US General, Dwight D Eisenhower was Supreme Commander of the allied forces and his senior commanders included British General Bernard Montgomery of El Alamein fame and General Omar Bradley commanding US forces. With Montgomery's support the BBC had elaborate plans to cover D-Day. Wilmot was accorded a pre-eminent role. Experienced BBC reporter, Frank Gillard, described Wilmot: "I found him very congenial, cordial, talkative...intellectually, in terms also of courage and bravery and determination, he was head and shoulders above most of us."

Wilmot would accompany the divisional headquarters of the British 6th Airborne's glider operation and land in France behind enemy lines on D-Day. It was a hazardous assignment. Wilmot's report from the glider is one of his most famous: "Over the coast we run out of cloud and there below us is the white curving strand of France and, mirrored in the dim moonlight, the twin ribbons of water we are looking for – the Orne and the Canal...as it leaves the tug the glider seems to stall and hover like a hawk about to strike. We are floating in a sky of fathomless uncertainty.... As the ground

rises to meet us, the pilots catch a glimpse of the pathfinders' lights and the white dusty road and the square Norman church-tower beside the landing zone...The soil of France rushes past beneath us and we touch down with a jolt on a ploughed field. It is 3.32 am. We are two minutes late."

After landing Wilmot recorded: "We could hear Germans shouting excitedly at a church nearby, starting a car driving furiously off. A quarter of a mile from us a German battery was firing out to sea." German tanks were just down the road from where Wilmot took shelter. In coming hours and days he provided first-hand accounts of brutal fighting. The 6th Airborne's commander, Major-General, Richard Gale, said of Wilmot: "He's almost one of my staff now."

According to Neil McDonald, Wilmot provided more than 100 despatches covering the Battle of Normandy during the seven weeks after D-Day. He had met and established a relationship with Montgomery and his intelligence officers that would prove to be decisive. The commander was now briefing Wilmot about the campaign. The foundations of mutual trust were laid.

In coming months Wilmot accompanied Montgomery's drive across France, the advance into Belgium, onto Brussels. His prowess as a war correspondent reached its zenith amid close quarter reports of fighting. But his strategic sense also deepened. As the allied armies advanced tensions grew at the political level between the 'big three' – Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joe Stalin and among the American and British commanders. The issue was: what would victory mean and who would dominate post-war Europe?

After the fall of Paris came a tactical flashpoint. Eisenhower's plan was to advance on a broad front but Montgomery argued for a new plan – a single northward thrust into the Ruhr, the industrial heart of Germany. Eisenhower refused. He believed Montgomery's proposal was not feasible. He may have been correct – but this was the pointer to far greater Anglo-American tensions. In *The Struggle for Europe*, Wilmot provides a brilliant analysis of conflicting American and British military cultures and the interaction between their commanders. On 4 May 1945 he broadcast on the surrender of the Germany military leaders to Montgomery. It was, however, the Russians who took Berlin without there being a single allied soldier in the city.

Post-war the Wilmots lived in Britain and Chester worked on the book, published seven years after the war's end. The opening sentence of its 700 pages reads: "In the summer of 1942 four hundred million people in Europe lay under the yoke of Germany rule." From this moment the reader is in the hands of a master narrator who advanced a thesis of devastating historical import.

Wilmot argued that Stalin, possessed by a "grand strategy that remained constant," had outmanoeuvred Roosevelt in military and political terms to make Russia the dominant power in Europe. He documented the astonishing extent of American goodwill and naivety towards Stalin. "Of one thing I am certain, Stalin is not an imperialist," Roosevelt said. His Administration believed there would be no major post-war differences with Russia. Eisenhower said both America and Russia "were free from the stigma of colonial empire building by force." Roosevelt felt there was no problem he and Stalin could not solve man-to-man. By contrast, the president was obsessed about Churchill's efforts to re-establish the British Empire. He told his son: "I've tried to make it clear to Winston...they must never get the idea we've in it just to help them hang onto the archaic, medieval Empire ideas."

Roosevelt's vision of the post-war world excluded spheres of influence and regional balances of power. His naivety saw him inform Stalin: "I am determined there shall be no breach between ourselves and the Soviet Union." In planning the post-war order he was more suspicious of Britain than Russia. Upon this basis Roosevelt made extensive concessions to the Soviet Union both in Europe and Asia.

The associated folly documented by Wilmot was the American divorce between military and political ends, in contrast to Churchill and Montgomery. Wilmot captured the American military ethos in the liberation of Europe: "The aim should be victory, nothing else. Since America fights for no political objectives except peace, no political directives should be given to American

commanders in the field.” This doctrine, Wilmot argued, came from the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs, General George C Marshall. The Americans failed to grasp the pivotal importance of taking Berlin.

By contrast, Wilmot said once military victory was assured Stalin’s main aim was less Hitler’s defeat than getting the Soviet army into the heart of Europe. He said that on 8 May 1945 when the war in Europe ended Poland – the cause of Britain’s war declaration – was “in the grip of another alien dictator...Berlin, Prague and Vienna as well as every capital in East Europe were again in the possession of a single power” – this time the Soviet Union. Wilmot argued that Marshall’s philosophy meant the military allied effort was devoted to an assault on Germany from the West and the “neglect of opportunities” in the Mediterranean and the Balkans. By the time of the ‘big three’ Yalta conference the Red Army was in control of all Eastern Europe except Greece.

Wilmot said this US strategic failure stood “on the twin pillars of Roosevelt’s belief that Stalin had no aggressive ambitions and Marshall’s determination to concentrate on victory in the field.” In his final chapter he concluded: “The two most serious miscalculations of the Second World War both concerned the Soviet Union: Hitler’s miscalculation of Russia’s military strength and Roosevelt’s miscalculation of Russia’s political ambition. It was these two errors of judgment which gave Stalin the opportunity of establishing the Soviet Union as the dominant power in Europe.”

In his writing Wilmot had access to German, British and American records. He worked closely with British military historian Liddell Hart who had interrogated many German generals. He interviewed scores of allied officers and generals. In particular, he was briefed at length by Montgomery and given access to his communications.

The Struggle for Europe is a pro-British book critical of the Americans in terms of the war’s historiography. It was, however, applauded on both sides of the Atlantic. British military historian, John Keegan, said Wilmot “effectively invented the modern method of writing contemporary military history.” Montgomery felt it vindicated him in his differences with the American commanders. The book was flawed in a number of respects but its central thesis I believe was correct and has been vindicated and re-cycled in the decades since publication.

Wilmot said he was fortunate as a war correspondent “of being an eye witness of many of the major operations” he described. His book is a classic in a genre: a journalist’s coverage evolving into an historian’s project. I read ‘The Struggle for Europe’ when I was 19 years old and it influenced decisions about my future career as well as my outlook as a journalist. I recall my father once telling me he had met Wilmot. I don’t know where but I assume Tobruk.

Post-war Wilmot was commissioned to write the official Australian war history of the Ninth Division at Tobruk and El Alamein. After his death that job fell to Barton Maughan who had served as an intelligence officer with the 2/13th Battalion, the devil’s own battalion. Barton who became a friend of mine did a superb job yet we lament what might have been – the masterpiece Wilmot would surely have produced.

As a war correspondent Wilmot was a pioneer who worked under intense pressures in the field and strove for excellence. There is a compelling quality to his work that transcends the generations. The nation remains in his debt – as journalist, broadcaster, historian, an Australian who went out and left his mark on the world, a man who saw the sweep of history but never forget the worth of the ordinary soldier.

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