Preface

On the evening of the 15th of August 1944 in Townsville, someone walked up to a sleeping Australian soldier and swung a blacksmith's hammer three times into his skull. The first two blows punctured his brain, which sprayed blood onto a nearby fence. The third created a two-inch gash across his face. The attacker kicked him in the crotch and face too; a tooth rolled onto the grass. A splash in the nearby creek, and then silence fell again. The soldier remained lying on the cold grass, barely alive, for the next 45 minutes. His mates later found his broken body, his mouth choked with blood, and rushed to find help. He was taken to hospital, where he lay for two days. At 8.30am on the 17th of August 1944, 36 hours after the bludgeoning, he was declared dead.

The soldier's name was Warwick Sidney Meale and his murder has changed my life.

It produced a shock wave so big that I can still feel it today, over seventy-five years later. It didn't start that way. There was no public outrage. No policies were reformed in Warwick's name, nor did his killer

gain notoriety. There weren't any sorrowful vigils, memorial marches or ceremonies. Warwick's circle of friends and family was blindsided by the cold-blooded attack and the media were intrigued by the mystery for a while, but normal life quickly resumed. You can find his details etched into panel twenty-seven at the Australian War Memorial where his name sits among the other 27,000 Australians who died during World War II. But it's the soldiers who died on the battlefield, not in Australia, who are remembered.

So how did the death of a forgotten twenty-year-old boy from Sydney get its claws into me? The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is family. Bloodlines, like copper wire, have an impressive conducting ability. Warwick was my grandmother Winifred's cousin, and they shared a special bond. They were childhood friends, brought closer by the shared scars of being forgotten by their older siblings. My grandmother died long before I was born, but the trauma of Warwick's death was transmitted to my mum at an early age. There was a good chance that Winifred's pain would have stopped there, the signal too weak to be picked up by a third generation. It happened with my three older sisters, who aren't that fazed by Warwick's story. But what gave his murder a renewed force for me was my sexuality. My mum believed that Warwick was gay and that his murder was a gay hate crime. The day I came out to Mum as gay, I became Warwick in her eyes. I was the one sleeping by the banks of Ross Creek in Queensland, as a killer approached to swing his hammer into my skull. It was a terrifying vision and one that stopped her from accepting who I was for a very long time.

I already knew, long before Mum did, that Warwick and I shared a secret. The stories and photographs of Warwick and Winifred that were handed down to me take place in a world of babysitting, dress-ups and

adventures. One photograph of him and my grandma hung in Mum's bedroom for as long as I can remember. Warwick is five years old and dressed in girl's clothes. I loved to wear dresses when I was that age too (and admittedly, I still do). But my similarity to Warwick didn't scare me, it comforted me. In a world where boys liking female things was shameful, Warwick showed me that it was okay.

Warwick may have come to me via my grandmother but she didn't hand down much information. In fact, she refused to mention his name after he died. My picture of Warwick emerges through the words of a handful of people. Three soldiers, who knew him well, testified at the inquest that he was smart and enjoyed dancing. The detectives, inquiring into his 'demeanour and mode of living', found evidence of an even-tempered and happy soldier. Military officials recorded his physical description (a slim, short teenager with dark-brown hair, blue eyes and no body marks), his occupation as a sales assistant, and his home address in Western Sydney. Rumours and family secrets filled in the rest.

Despite my glimpses into who Warwick was, he remains an elusive figure. Perhaps it's futile to expect to learn about someone's life through how they died. I know how tall he was but I'll never know what motivated him to enlist. I have testimonies from his friends but I'll never know if they were telling the truth or the whole story. I can stand in front of his tombstone but I'll never know what was going through his mind on his last night alive, two months before his twenty-first birthday. I'll also never know if he was gay, as my mother believed, or not.

When I was a teenager I launched my own amateur cold-case investigation, powered by the internet and an unhealthy obsession. This book is a product of that investigation. I told myself I had a duty to identify Warwick's killer. While at first it looked to the police like a typical

drunken brawl gone too far, the coroner concluded that someone had murdered him, entirely unprovoked, as he dozed under the Queensland sky. I knew that couldn't be the whole story. My detective work took me on an unexpected journey through defining moments of Australia's history: the toll of World War II on the Australian home front and its people, state-sponsored homophobia and military disgraces. I now know that these stories not only sealed Warwick's fate, but have shaped Australia and, in a way, me as well.

Chapter 1:
Provost John Douglas Colquhoun

11.40 pm, Tuesday 15th of August 1944

A soldier burst through the entrance of the military police depot tent. He had a sweat-dampened hairline and was out of breath. 'One of my cobbers has been booted or hit by a bottle,' he said, panicking, but also timid, because he knew he would be in trouble. Provost John Douglas Colquhoun sat up and pushed his papers aside. A single light globe illuminated his tent. It had a temporary wooden floor and just enough space for a few pieces of repurposed furniture. Provost Colquhoun was on the graveyard shift at the depot. There had been a dance earlier in the evening so it was only a matter of time before another drunk soldier lost control and got into a fight. And there was no doubt this soldier had been drinking. 'My name is Clyde Neumann,' said the soldier, 'I'm a signalman at Camp Julago'. Provost Colquhoun looked Clyde up and down. He didn't recognise him.

But he did notice that he had fresh blood on both of his hands.

Clyde told Provost Colquhoun that his friend needed to be taken to a doctor immediately but he was out cold. They needed a car but Provost Colquhoun's depot wasn't important enough to have one of the strictly-rationed Australian Army vehicles. Taking a deep breath to swallow his pride, Provost Colquhoun marched over to his phone and dialled the number of the nearby American military police station. As with everything, the Americans had an endless supply of vehicles.

Moments later, two American military police arrived in their jeep and Provost Colquhoun and Clyde jumped in. Clyde directed them down Flinders St, right into Stanley St, and then left into Hanran St. They passed Heatley's Dance Hall on the corner where the dance was still wrapping up. People were stumbling out of the hall and into the street. When they approached Victoria Bridge at the end of Hanran St, Clyde told them to pull over to the right.

The beam of the jeep's headlights lit the otherwise pitch-black creek bank. There, in the pool of light, lay the limp body of a young, uniformed soldier. His head was cradled in the lap of another soldier who was kneeling in front of a fence that surrounded a concrete air raid shelter. The kneeling soldier looked up with relief. The team from the jeep ran towards the injured soldier and Provost Colquhoun knelt by the victim's side. Dry blood covered his entire face. 'He hasn't spoken a word,' said the kneeling soldier, whose breath smelt of alcohol.

Provost Colquhoun could immediately see that this was a bad one. He yelled, with his Scottish accent, to a group of uniformed men and women who had encircled them, 'Stand aside please. We need to put this soldier in the vehicle'. Provost Colquhoun and the American provost picked up the unconscious soldier, one hugging his torso, the other

grasping his legs. They carried him up the grassy bank and lowered him into the back of the jeep.

Once back at the depot, Provost Colquhoun ordered Clyde to lay the unconscious soldier down on the floor while he phoned for a military ambulance. As soon as the ambulance was on its way, Provost Colquhoun attempted to wake the soldier again, but nothing happened. The only evidence that the soldier was alive was a faint pulse. Blood was still trickling down his face; it had matted his hair into clumps. Provost Colquhoun unbuttoned the soldier's shirt to locate an identity disc, but his neck was bare. Picking up his slack arm, Provost Colquhoun noted that he was wearing a wrist watch, a timepiece fitted onto a large leather strap. He then plunged his hands into the soldier's pockets and rummaged around. He first found a few coins – whoever had attacked him hadn't robbed him. He also felt a small piece of paper. Pulling it out into the light, he instantly recognised it as a leave pass with the name 'Sig Meale W.S.' written on the top right corner. It was valid for another 15 minutes, until midnight.

At 11.45 pm, only 5 minutes after Clyde had first burst through the entrance of Provost Colquhoun's tent, a military ambulance took the injured soldier away, a quick response made possible by the size of Townsville's centre. Provost Colquhoun watched as the ambulance disappeared down the dark street. Back in the tent - where a pool of blood was smeared on the floor - Provost Colquhoun ordered Clyde and his friend to sit down. It was time for them to explain what the hell had led to this mess.

Chapter 2:
'Quirk'

11:45 pm, Tuesday 15th of August 1944

The "Toc H", a multipurpose community hall, was located on the second floor of Heatley's Department Store warehouse on Flinders Street. It was a favourite among many of the troops stationed in Townsville. During the day it was a quiet refuge away from military camps and at night it doubled as an event space. On the 15th of August, the tables were cleared away and everyone was invited to a night of dancing.

One of the staff members of the Toc H was known as Quirk. It was his job to keep the intoxicated soldiers fed, clean up any spills and make sure everything ran smoothly which, thankfully, it had. After the band had played their final song, the lights came up and the crowd slowly filtered down the stairs onto the street. After scrubbing the place down

and returning the dripping mops to the storage cupboard, Quirk was free to go home.

He stepped out into the cool evening, which was a nice reprieve from the stuffy hall. He couldn't really see where he was going because of the darkness caused by the wartime blackout, but he didn't need any light. He'd taken the same route home many times before. Most people from the dance had already gone back to their camps but a few were dragging their heels. As he continued to walk, he heard giggling from behind a tree. A few more paces and he caught a whiff of vomit on the breeze. A soldier kissing a woman against the rear exit of one of the buildings. A gun echoed somewhere in the distance. A bottle smashed. He heard drunken voices shouting, whistling and singing. An airman yelling at a taxi driver.

Hanran Street intersected, and still does intersect, with a meander of Ross Creek. Ross Creek, the last branch of the river that snakes its way through Townsville, divides the city in two. Quirk turned off the street and up onto Victoria Bridge that connected the north and south bank.

It was there that he saw a group of five or six American sailors loitering on the path on the left hand side of the bridge. He could tell they were American even before he heard their accents. They were wearing trousers that flared out at the bottom, and jumpers with tight cuffs and white piping. Each had a back flap that was tied around their shoulders with a long satin neckerchief, and their pristine white dixie cup hats were perched on their heads.

Quirk crossed to the opposite path. He'd read stories in the papers about groups of sailors who would roam the streets at night looking for trouble, mugging, bashing or even pulling a knife on unsuspecting victims.

As he got closer to the group, one sailor broke away and walked across the road toward Quirk. A wave of dread came over him. But instead of

intersecting with Quirk, the sailor continued past him and gazed off the side of the bridge. Quirk's fear gave way to curiosity; what was he looking at? He knew that Ross Creek was flowing underneath them and that there were a few shops and air raid shelters on the shore, but only from memory. He couldn't see a single thing at that time of night. It was extremely dark on the bridge, let alone down on the river bank where there wasn't any light at all.

The sailor in front of him turned around and yelled back to his friends in his Hollywood accent, "They're putting him in the ambulance van". Quirked followed the sailor's gaze and saw the headlights of a vehicle, but he had no idea how the sailor knew it was an ambulance or what was going on down there. He hadn't seen anything when he walked past moments earlier. He wasn't going to hang around to find out either.

Quirk continued home and locked the door firmly behind him. He didn't know what the American sailors had been up to on Victoria Bridge, but something told him it wasn't quite right.