

**SOUND
MIND
DEAD BODY**

**DAVE
WARNER**



FREMANTLE PRESS

First published 2026 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover images by Goldpix, Everettpvrk, adobe.com; Alexander Fastovets, Annie Spratt, Daoudi Aissa, unsplash.com; Ana Lo, shutterstock.com
Designed by Carolyn Brown, tendersigh.com.au
Map designed by Chris Crook.
Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760995232 (paperback)
ISBN 9781760995249 (ebook)



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Fremantle Press is supported by the Western Australian State Government through the Department of Cultural Industries, Tourism and Sport.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.



PROLOGUE

THE WESTERN FRONT, AUTUMN 1917

The splintering of his starboard strut at the same instant he heard the machine gun was the first Willets knew he was in peril. The German must have been lurking above and dived on him like a hawk after a budgerigar. Hesitation meant death, or at the very least a fraught landing in the barbed wire and trench-pitted no-man's-land. Instinctively Willets pulled the plane into a right turn, then dived. Weeks back he'd noted how the Brit pilots in his squadron mostly turned left, and had trained himself to do the opposite in the hope that the enemy might be caught off guard. He now executed the manoeuvre automatically as a stream of bullets sailed over his left shoulder. His SE5a had proven tricky at first but once mastered had good manoeuvrability. Its Hispano-Suiza engine thrummed as he corkscrewed, evading chasing bullets. He flattened out but only for a few seconds, then drove upwards, hoping he'd lost his pursuer. No such luck. Once more he was fired upon. It had to be a Fokker to stick with him like that, and one with a very sharp pilot. Willets dove again and this time threw left. His engine stuttered and a cold fist gripped his chest. With anything less than top speed he was flying a coffin.

Right now his war was seconds away from ending with him either dead or very severely disabled. He was being fired at again, now from dead ahead ... or was he?

The bullets arrowed down over his head, somehow missing his tail. Only then he realised it was retaliatory fire from one of his own. A quick glance above identified a Sopwith. The hunter had become the hunted, the German now the one in trouble. Willets' brain calculated that the

engine sound of his tormentor was receding not advancing. The Sopwith dived in pursuit of the Fokker.

Fred Willets thanked God and the unknown British pilot who had saved him. At least for one more day. Already a third of the men he'd started with seven weeks back were dead. Since the Sopwith Camels and SE5a fighters had arrived, things had looked up. Life on the front though was still a short wick. He rolled his plane around and finally caught a glimpse of the German plane in the distance. Just as he himself had done, its pilot was corkscrewing evasively, the Sopwith behind and firing.

Sometimes you got lucky.

It had been a successful mission. An observation balloon taken down and its German defender aircraft hit, though not killed from what Willets had seen. He'd pursued longer than was sensible and this had taken him deep behind German lines. This latest rumble meant he'd be slim on fuel to make his airfield. However, make it he would.

It was then, pointing for home once more but still on the Bosch side of the lines, that he saw in a field below the crumpled remains of a Sopwith Camel. It was some two hundred yards the wrong side of no-man's-land. Perhaps he would have risked investigating anyway, but his recent rescue by the other Sopwith made certain of it. He dove low and fast, hopeful that any German weaponry would be pointed in some other direction. As he came in at what would have been rooftop height had there been any houses, he saw, beyond a screen of pine trees perhaps five hundred yards off, a squad of advancing enemy soldiers.

And now, close to the crashed plane, he could see the pilot, seated, propped like a child's doll, his back against what remained of the tail.

Shit.

There was no indication the pilot was alive, but it could not be assumed he wasn't. Willets cut his speed and feathered down on what looked like a clear but bumpy surface. He touched down just pre-stall at about forty miles per hour. The plane was now a buggy bumping along the ground. Already he was calculating how far away those German soldiers he'd noted behind the trees would be now. Not far enough! Once they were through the woods, he would be a sitting duck. Heaving himself from the cockpit he hit the ground running. The pilot's eyes were closed. He looked dead.

'Hey there, mate!' Willets yelled and was rewarded with the merest and shortest flicker of eyelids. About his own age, the pilot was bleeding from

a bullet wound in his right arm. This may not have been the pilot's main problem though. Likely it was injuries from the crash.

'Let's get you out of here.'

The phrase was no sooner out of Willets' mouth than the rifle fire began. The initial shots were wasted, giving Willets time to heave the injured man over his shoulders and trudge towards his plane, his boots sinking in the soft soil, his only thought how he might transport the man, there being no room in the cockpit. More heavily than intended he dropped the man onto the lower port wing. The rifles were still out of range. Just.

Reaching into the cockpit Willets extracted a rolled rope they used to tow a target for the riflemen to practise on. He lashed the man's ankles together, looped the rope around a strut then laced it over the injured pilot's body before securing him across the chest and tying off the securing rope on the underside of the wing as best he could.

Bullets whizzed by. Definitely in range now. He leapt back into his cockpit and with several quick thrusts on the hand pump primed the engine. Then he selected both magnetos, wound fast, and prayed. The engine kicked into life. There were ripping sounds as bullets struck his fuselage.

He accelerated, terrified that the injured man's body would slip off the wing. Somewhere behind him a machine gun opened up. The plane was rapidly gathering speed. Willets resisted the temptation of a premature take-off, but as soon as he reached fifty he lifted off, praying he'd not be too unstable with his new cargo. Guns continued to bark but he was airborne now and adjusting to the weight on the port wing.

As bullets flung themselves after him, defenceless and vulnerable, he made a promise never to go duck hunting again.

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NEAR COOLGARDIE, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1929

It was near sunset when they found Constable Lucas. Only twenty-three, Lucas had been sent to join the gold squad after a year's service in Perth. The young Aboriginal tracker, Daniel, had followed Lucas' bicycle track through the sandy scrub without difficulty.

Willets squatted down and examined Lucas' lifeless body. Probably killed early this morning, from the look of it ambushed and shot through the back. Fred Willets dreaded having to inform Lucas' wife, Mary. Ever since they'd reduced the squad in the goldfields here to just two men, it had been a perilous vocation to be a policeman. Only marginally less dangerous than being a soldier in Ypres back in the War.

If men weren't stealing gold from the mining companies, they were stealing from each other – physical nuggets, tampered scales, claim jumping – although what had no doubt led to Lucas' murder was the illegal smelting of gold.

Having received reports of a two-man team operating in the bush, Willets had headed for Kanowna where the most recent report had placed the men. Lucas had been told to investigate closer to Coolgardie, Willets believing this would be safer for the less experienced constable. He'd instructed Lucas not to engage the men if he discovered them but to return to the town until he himself returned.

Three years before, the two police officers charged with administering the territory had been murdered and dismembered. After a lot of chest-puffing by the authorities and a brief period of reinforcements, the numbers of police had once again been reduced, to just two.

And now, mused Willets staring grimly at his slain comrade, one. The concession that had been made – not an official one, mind – was that a blind eye would be turned to the officers carrying weapons. Lucas had been unarmed, however. Willets was not. He carried a 0.38 Enfield revolver. Willets had found nothing near Kanowna to corroborate the tip that there was any sort of smelter about, and this immediately aroused suspicions that the tip had been a diversion. One of the mine managers had lent Willets his Citroën for the trip. Willets had turned it around and sped back to Kalgoorlie. When Lucas had not returned by lunchtime Willets grew uneasy. Rather than use the car whose approach was obvious, he chose to go on horseback even though this presented problems with his gammy leg. Daniel was perhaps not the best of the trackers, but he was a far better rider than the others and certainly superior to the handicapped Willets.

‘I’m nothing but an old crock,’ Willets chided himself. Although this was immediately followed by an apology to the Lord for his ingratitude. The Lord might have let Willets perish when his plane was shot down six months shy of the War’s end. Instead, he’d got to recuperate in an English hospital with wonderful young women nursing him. True, his right leg would never be the same but after months of hard work he could walk with no more than a limp and some discomfort. More importantly to Willets, he could still fly.

Not for the first time, he recalled the young English pilot whose life he had tried to save three months before Willets’ own demise. The fellow, Pedhurst he’d learned was his name, had clung to life for nearly a week before succumbing.

‘And you’re whingeing about a leg that still functions!’ he scolded.

Still, it could be painful as the devil, especially on a cold desert night.

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Even without Daniel’s help Willets would easily have found the remnants of the forge and campsite. The miscreants had moved, and in a hurry. Daniel held up two fingers to indicate the number of attackers. The boy was quite capable of speaking English but out here language was so useless you rarely bothered to open your mouth except for food or beer. They remounted and followed the tracks. Two men and a donkey. The sky was a rich golden-orange now. Presently it would be dark.

As instructed, Daniel pulled up as soon as he sensed their quarry ahead. From here Willets would take it alone. Daniel indicated he believed the men to be half a mile from them.

‘You wait here.’

Willets checked his revolver was loaded and pressed on quietly. As always, Daniel was right. Soon Willets smelled smoke and after another two hundred yards heard the rattle of a tin cup. He dismounted, tethered the horse to a small tree and began his advance across the sparse landscape, nothing but low scrub with a few gums like goalposts on a sporting field. His boots almost surfed through the loose sand, darkness cloaking him. The moon was thin, the air bone-dry.

Unerringly he headed towards the origin of the sounds, acutely aware that his colleague had been ambushed and determined this time it would be the other way around.

The men were camped not more than fifty yards off. From here their conversation was an indistinct mumble. Ever so slowly Willets advanced until he was sheltered behind a lone gum tree. He must have watched them for close on twenty minutes and now, with his eyes adjusted, could clearly see one man moving around with what was either a rifle or a stick in his hand. Willets decided he would assume it was the former and when, a few minutes later, a lantern was ignited Willets congratulated himself for his caution. That was definitely a rifle. It had been set down but was within reach. His war years had taught Willets that when one was outnumbered, it paid to be patient. And so it proved.

His break came when one man took himself off to urinate at the rim of the lantern’s low reach. Willets moved swiftly and, despite his bad leg, near silently.

The first the man knew of his presence was when he heard the revolver cock behind him.

‘Not a word. On your knees, hands up.’

The man complied.

‘Hands behind your back.’

The man did as instructed, then Willets clamped the fellow’s wrists in the steel handcuffs.

Willets had a choice: bring the man with him as a shield or leave him here and hope he behaved. Had Willets been completely able-bodied he would have chosen the first option, but if the man turned on him it might get messy.

‘Wait here. Not a sound,’ he said.

He started towards the other fellow, a burly figure from what Willets could tell. He was only a few feet away when the confederate yelled his warning.

‘Stan! Copper!’

Option one would have been better, thought Willets as Stan reached for the rifle.

‘Don’t!’ yelled Willets but Stan ignored him, seized the weapon and turned.

Willets could have shot him right then, but he didn’t. The men stood, weapons pointing at each other.

‘Put the weapon down, Stan,’ commanded Willets, studying the man’s shifting eyes.

‘No, you drop yours.’

Willets had no doubt what would happen if he did that.

‘I think not.’

Willets was a decent shot with a revolver. He studied the man’s finger on the trigger and wondered, what did Stan see in his adversary’s eyes at that moment? Steely resolution? The disenchantment of a man who had survived the War but been forever scarred? A bachelor who cared neither whether he lived or died? It might have been any of those. It might simply have been that he saw the resolve of a man who would not let evil triumph, who at the risk of his own life would hold a murderer to account. Willets could not be sure because he was not sure of the answer in his own mind.

Whatever it was that Stan saw, however, it was enough to make him drop the rifle.