

DATELINE:

Wednesday, April 19 at 8.30pm

CHESTER WILMOT: A JOURNALIST'S WAR

“As a war correspondent I would rate him among the top five, among Australians he was probably the best....With perhaps a certain amount of arrogance he took it upon himself to correct the generals...and influence the course of the war.”

Author Phillip Knightly

As ANZAC day approaches, on SBS DATELINE on Wednesday, April 19 at 8.30pm Bronwyn Adcock tells the forgotten story of Chester Wilmot, the ABC radio reporter who risked his career by challenging the most powerful man in the Australian military.

Broadcasting from the front line of World War Two at Tobruk and the Kokoda Track, Wilmot didn't just report on the war, he critiqued it. When he saw problems with the way the war was being fought, he said so. The main target of his criticism was General Thomas Blamey, the Commander in Chief of Australia's armed forces.

Wilmot was especially appalled with what he saw at Kokoda – he thought the troops were ill-equipped and unprepared for jungle warfare. One particularly provocative report was banned outright after Wilmot wrote, *“I was bitter for I knew that somewhere under those treetops there were unnecessary Australian graves.”*

Ultimately Wilmot took an extraordinary step – he went to Canberra and confronted Prime Minister Curtin directly with his concerns about Blamey's conduct. According to Professor J.D.B. Miller, who was working for the ABC at Parliament House at the time:

“Prime Minister Curtin had given him a very good hearing but said, look, there's only two things we can do with Blamey, we must either back him or sack him, and sacking him would be so bad for morale here in Australia. So everything you say may be right, but we have to back him.”

Shortly after Wilmot's trip to Canberra, General Blamey stripped him of his official accreditation... effectively ending his career as a front line reporter. When Blamey later tried to get Wilmot enlisted, the ABC sent him to Britain - where he became a famous correspondent for the BBC.

“You've got to remember there is a full scale war on here. Blamey is concerned with fighting a world war and lives of Australians are at stake... and what he doesn't need is somebody trying to undermine his authority as Commander-in-Chief.”

Professor David Horner, Blamey's biographer

“I think the position of Sir Thomas Blamey should have been undermined. He was a corrupt, drunken, incompetent... whose lack of judgment resulted in the deaths of many, many Australians.”

Neil McDonald, Wilmot's biographer

For information contact SBS publicist Verity Leatherdale on (02) 9430 3784.



program publicity