

PROLOGUE

July 25, 1914. Young Pieter Forbes Wels of The Hague was feeling pretty good. Only days before he had heard that he had passed his *H.B.S. eindexamens*, the high school exit exams – a major rite of passage in Holland. Telegraphed congratulations had poured in from relatives and friends throughout the Netherlands. Now he could make plans to go to the southern town of Breda and attend the army's *Koninklijke Militaire Academie*, Holland's West Point, and one of the world's oldest military schools. Pieter would be following in the footsteps of his father, a career officer and major currently attached to the General Staff office in The Hague, the Netherlands' seat of government. Perhaps like many rising cadets, he dreamed of reaching the top ranks, as indeed he would (he retired as full colonel of the general staff). In the meantime, Pieter could look forward to enjoying a few more weeks of summer before he went off to the endless drills, rules, and lessons of the military school.

It was certainly a good time for daydreaming; July had been unusually warm, always a welcome thing in the Dutch royal city, nestled as it is against the North Sea. We will never know exactly what Pieter was doing or thinking on that summer evening. Whatever it was, at around 5 p.m. he was interrupted by the ring of the doorbell. Coming to the front door, he saw that it was a messenger of the national telegraph service. This did not overly surprise him, as he was expecting more congratulatory telegrams from his relatives. After the messenger left, he tore open the telegram and found himself staring at a pair of words that made no sense to him:

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Puzzled, he went in search of his father. Major M.D.A. Forbes Wels needed only a moment to take in the telegram's contents and the location of the sender – Cologne, Germany – before dashing out the door and making for the General Staff office. He knew exactly what the telegram meant: War was coming, and his country and army had at most a few days to get ready.