



1984 RUSI VIC BLAMEY ORATION

By Major General Ken G. Cooke, ED

There must be something special about a man who on the centenary of his birth and thirty-three years after his death can still trigger a gathering of so many people, including so many busy and distinguished people, in a Melbourne park on a Tuesday morning in January. So let us take a few minutes to review briefly the life of Thomas Alfred Blamey to try and determine just how this can be.

He was born on 24th January, 1884 on the outskirts of Wagga Wagga, the seventh of the ten children of Richard and Margaret Blamey. His father had tried his luck at farming, both in Queensland and New South Wales, but as was often the case the ventures ended in disaster due to the old traditional enemies of drought, bush fire and fluctuating cattle prices. He then settled in Wagga where he earned his living as a contract drover. His was a pioneer family so typical of the time and it exemplified the strength of our immigrant stock both before and since.

Young Tom was educated in Wagga, first at the Government school and then for the last two years at the Grammar school to which he won a place on his pure ability. His upbringing generally was as you would expect. He had to help around the family property before and after school and on vacations he worked as a tar-boy in the local shearing sheds. As he grew older he went on several droving trips to help his father. His was a rugged but healthy life, designed to instill a familiarity with hard work and to develop a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance. Like many of our famous soldiers, he obtained his first taste of military life through the Cadet Corps. During his last two years at school he was the head cadet of his unit and showed aptitude for leadership and military skills.

At the ripe old age of sixteen he became a pupil teacher at the local school where he continued his interest in the cadet movement as an officer of cadets. Some people in later life may have found it hard to believe at times that the young Tom was a Methodist Church preacher and an active worker for church causes.

In 1903, aged nineteen, he decided to try his luck in distant fields and obtained a teaching appointment to Fremantle, Western Australia. He continued his association with the cadets and also with the Church and was close to entering the Ministry as his chosen full time career when in 1906 he saw an advertisement offering entry to the Permanent Cadet Instructional Staff. He

decided that this was for him and studied hard to finish third on an Australia wide basis. Initially, however, he was rejected, not because of his ability but because the Army was reluctant to pay his cost of removal to Victoria and there were no postings then available in Western Australia. By a refusal to accept defeat combined with a good showing, even then, of his knowledge of staff duties, he managed to alter that decision and was enlisted into the cadet organisation as a lieutenant aged twenty-two.

He married in 1909 on the princely salary of L250 a year. Since his first son was born in 1910 it must have been with some considerable relief that he was promoted Captain in December 1910 and his pay increased to L375 a year.

In 1911 he won, again by hard work, intensive private study and by burning the midnight oil, a much coveted place to the Staff College at Quetta in India. After successfully completing that course his family returned direct to Australia where his second son, Tom, was born. Tom Senior went to the United Kingdom for further training and experience.

At the outbreak of war he was serving on the staff of the headquarters of a territorial division. When the first A.I.F. was formed and sent to the Middle East it was natural that T.A. Blamey, then a major, should join the Headquarters 1st Division as a staff officer in Egypt. He was with it when it landed at Gallipoli on that historic 25th day of April, 1915. He served there throughout the campaign, briefly commanding the 4th Battalion, and then helping to raise the Headquarters 2nd Division with which he served until the evacuation in December 1915.

In July 1916 he was promoted lieutenant-colonel and appointed General Staff Officer Grade 1 of the Headquarters 1st Division for the campaigns in Europe. Again he commanded a battalion, the 2nd Battalion, for a short time and the 1st Infantry Brigade only briefly. It was a source of personal regret to him that his skills as a staff officer were so much in demand that he was given little chance for command in the field.

When General Monash was appointed to command the 1st Australian Corps on 1st June, 1918 he selected Blamey to be his Chief of Staff with the rank of Brigadier-General. The combination of Monash and Blamey was responsible for some of the most outstanding victories of the War. The Battle of Hamel was a world first for the successful integration of infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft and provided a model for subsequent application by British and other armies. The Battle of Amiens was said to be the blow which led to the shattering of the Hindenburg Line. A British military historian Major General Essame, in his book "The Battle for Europe 1918" wrote: "Monash and Blamey unquestionably outshone all their British counterparts in ability and battle expertise."

On Blamey, Monash wrote:

“Someday the orders which he drafted or the long series of history making military operations upon which we collaborated will become the model for staff colleges and schools for military instruction.”

They did.

After World War I Blamey continued in the regular Army becoming what is now known as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

In 1925 he was asked to give up his military career to accept appointment as the Victorian Commissioner of Police. It was considered that the Police Force then was in need of stability, firm control and proper direction which were not immediately available from within the force itself. Blamey agreed. At the same time he joined the Militia, rising to the rank Major-General and Commander of the 3rd Division in 1931, a posting he held until 1937. His term as Police Commissioner was a stormy one, beset with personal and political incidents. He resigned from the force in 1936.

Things then looked bleak for Blamey. As a man who then lacked influence he suddenly found that he also lacked friends and supporters. A number of real friends, who knew Blamey better and were loyal to Blamey the man, stood by him those depressing years. During that period he refused to give in to adversity. He commenced, under a pseudonym, giving defence related talks on Radio 3UZ warning of the coming world conflict and of Australia's lack of preparedness. No doubt, this helped to keep him in touch with military matters.

As international tension increased the Government looked for a man strong enough, experienced and capable enough to help in belated war preparations. Blamey was selected as the first Chairman of the Manpower Committee and Controller-General of the Recruiting Secretariat. In the six months between September 1938 and March 1939 he was responsible for successfully effecting a doubling of the strength of the Militia from 35,000 to 70,000 - a feat considered by many beforehand as an impossible achievement.

Then, with the outbreak of hostilities and the raising of the second A.I.F., there came the need to select a commander for the 6th Division - the first Australian force to leave for overseas. Blamey, who was then aged fifty-five, was selected, not without controversy, over all others. Probably it was this appointment more than any other incident that made him the centre of jealousy and the subject of intrigue which was to haunt him for the balance of his military life.

It represented, however, the start of what was, no doubt, to be the finest part of his long career. He was promoted Lieutenant-General in 1940 and General in 1941. He successively held the appointments of General Officer Commanding 6th Division, General Officer Commanding Australian Forces Egypt, Commander 1st Australian Corps, Commander Anzac Corps in Greece, Deputy Commander-in-Chief Middle East, the Commander-in-Chief Australian Military Forces and at the same time Commander of Allied Land Forces in the Pacific Theatre.

There are many things that can be said about this period of his life but I shall select just four matters upon which I shall briefly comment.

Firstly, he was the only land force commander in any Allied army to retain command throughout the War. He commanded the first Australian force to be raised for overseas service in September 1939 and was commanding the whole Australian Army six years later. That, in itself, in the military history of any country in the world, must be rated as an outstanding achievement.

Secondly, he fought hard throughout this period to protect the integrity of the Australian Army from the interference of and subjugation to its allies. He continually resisted powerful pressures in the Middle East, emanating from Churchill himself and flowing downwards, to prevent what he saw as the misuse of Australian troops. Similarly, he clashed with McArthur and refused to give in to proposals to use Australian troops in the Pacific campaigns in ways he considered were against the best interests of this country and particularly of its soldiers.

Thirdly, the nature of his responsibilities and span of control was perhaps unique and unbelievably demanding. He had to organise the Army from virtually nothing. He had to weld the volunteer A.I.F. and the conscript Militia into a single viable force. From his appointment as Commander-in-Chief in May 1942 until the end of the War he was obliged to retain responsibility not only for operations in the field but at the same time for the day to day organisation, administration and training of the Army at home together with the support of the total force. This breadth of responsibility did not occur in other armies and I doubt, indeed I hope, we would never put that load on another man again.

Fourthly, it is interesting to consider just a few comments made about him by important contemporaries.

Prime Minister Curtin, on his appointment as Commander-in-Chief and in answer to his detractors, said: "I want a commander of the Australian Army, not a Sunday school superintendent."

Field-Marshal Wavell, when he was Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East, said of Blamey: "He was probably the best soldier we had in the Middle East. Not an easy man to deal with but a very satisfactory man to deal with. His military knowledge was unexampled and he was a positive, firm and a very satisfactory commander."

In retrospect, is it not possible that the so called 'faults' of which he was often accused may indeed have been very necessary steps in his development to make him just the man Australia needed in its time of danger? Could, for example, an over-sensitive person have carried it through? Could a man without supreme confidence in his own ability and the justice of his own cause have stuck it out? Could an individual without a resoluteness of character, strength of purpose, even stubbornness, have been able to resist the many pressures that were put on him?

Perhaps even what seemed to have been the most unfortunate of his experiences may have helped to shape him for the great demands the War placed on him. For example, in referring to his police career, Major-General Sir John Gellibrand, said: "It widened his outlook and gave him a deeper insight into the greater problems of national life and military service. The most stringent test that can be applied to any person, particularly a war time commander, is that of success or failure - and there can be no argument Blamey did succeed."

Now I am not saying that no one else could have commanded the Australian Army at the time or even have done so with less controversy. What I am saying is that Blamey did command a victorious Army from start to finish, raising and training it virtually from scratch, with at times little support and against many internal and external pressures. For that he deserves great credit and the gratitude of the nation. Did he get it? He did not! His services were terminated in November 1945 on just fourteen days' notice. He received no pension, gratuity or reward (except for his old car which had also survived the rigours of campaigning in the Middle East and the Pacific) until, in 1950 when, less than twelve months before his death, he was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal, the only serving Australian soldier before or since to have been so honoured.

During most of its history so far Australia has had an unfortunate tradition of not properly acknowledging its truly great men. Deakin, Hughes, Monash, Blamey, Bruce, Curtin, Chifley, Menzies are all names that come to mind yet we go out of way to make legendary heroes of bushrangers and sportsmen. We eulogise many who display not the slightest trace of public spiritedness or social conscience and who possess many more obnoxious or damaging vices than were ever exhibited by the Field Marshal. Just compare the Australian attitude with that displayed in other countries. Two examples -

Nelson, a naval hero, was a man of independent outlook, sometimes openly insubordinate, capable of disobeying direct order, possessing a very marked sense of vanity and having a well-known personal life which was highly questionable according to the mores of the day. Yet he represents the very epitome and tradition of the Royal Navy and his victory at Trafalgar is still enthusiastically celebrated each year and he is remembered around the world by navies of British origin.

Let us compare, in a kind way, the careers of two Field Marshals - Slim the British soldier and Blamey the Australian. Indeed, they have many points of similarity. They were both born in the late 1800's - Slim just seven years after Blamey. Both came from humble if not poor circumstances, in small communities. Both commenced their working careers as school teachers. Both entered the Army in other than the usual channels for professional officers - Slim through the Territorial Army and Blamey through the Cadet Corps. Both served on Gallipoli - Slim as a Temporary Lieutenant in a battalion, Blamey as a Major on Divisional Staff. Blamey's career was much the more distinguished during World War I - I have already referred to it. Slim finished the War as a Temporary Major, Company Commander. Both qualified at the Staff College, Quetta. Both

supplemented their incomes between the wars in the field of journalism - Slim writing under the pseudonym of "Anthony Mills" and Blamey as a broadcaster and writer under the title of "The Sentinel". Blamey, as I mentioned, not only commanded the Australian Field Force throughout the War but also had responsibility for the total force, at its peak comprising twelve divisions together with appropriate corps and army troops. Slim started the War as a Brigade Commander and achieved real fame as the Commander of the 14th Army which comprised six divisions. At all times he was backed by a Commander-in-Chief and a Supreme Commander who looked after matters to his rear. He was not appointed Commander-in-Chief until the end of hostilities. In making these comparisons I do not in any way seek to denigrate Slim. He is, in fact, one of my greatest personal military idols. What I merely want to do is compare the treatment accorded these two officers. Blamey, from what I have said, had, in the main, greater and more constant responsibility at senior rank than Slim in both World Wars. Both were successful in their wartime roles. Yet, whereas Blamey received scant recognition, Slim was awarded no less than five orders of knighthood, was elevated to the office of Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was appointed Governor-General of Australia and, finally, towards the end of his career, as a mark of appreciation appointed Governor and Constable of Windsor Castle where he could in comfort and with dignity establish his personal home at little cost to him. I wish merely to compare how one country honoured a successful wartime leader to the lack of appreciation shown by Australia to its senior soldier.

Perhaps as a nation we are changing. Maybe Australia is growing up. I do detect in recent times an emergence of national pride in this country and the ability to recognise the strength of a community leader while at the same time acknowledging that he or she is still a human being. In short, I believe we are starting to learn that we can have a superman with every man's weaknesses.

If so, then perhaps it can be of benefit to future generations to remember T.A. Blamey and learn the lessons that a study of his life will reveal. He should demonstrate to Australians of the future that a public figure, a leader, can have and indeed should be expected to have normal human attributes - weaknesses as well as strengths. Further, it will be seen that in this country it matters not what is one's origin or beginnings. It should become apparent that study, hard work, attention to detail, perseverance, a sense of achievement and a refusal to accept defeat will win through. It will become obvious that the highest positions in the land are open to those who try and are prepared to keep trying. Furthermore, students of Blamey would learn that Australia and Australians are not inferior to other countries and races, that we can and will stand on our own feet and, if necessary, pursue an independent line. Finally, they will see demonstrated the value of loyalty, both personal loyalty and group loyalty. They will learn that loyalty is a necessary ingredient of success and that if one expects to receive it then one must also give it, that it is a two-way arrangement.

In T.A. Blamey we have the embodiment of the real Australian character and therefore he forms an important part of our evolving history. It is our responsibility to ensure that his story is not forgotten, as has been the case with so many others, but that it is passed on to future generations to help establish and develop our ongoing traditions.

What more fitting occasion is there than this, the centenary of his birth, to pledge that we shall ensure that the Blamey legend lasts for the next one hundred years and beyond. So in that way he will continue to serve his country and contribute to the preservation of its way of life as he showed himself so ready and so willing to do during his lifetime.