

Shrine of Remembrance Exhibition Launch
Australia's Field Marshal - The Leadership of Sir Thomas Blamey
By Thomas E. (Ted) Blamey, Grandson
26 July 2016

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, family and friends.

First, a brief personal perspective.

I was young, not quite six years old, my brother Terry just one, when our grandfather died. We never knew our grandmother Minnie, she having died in 1935 when our father, Thomas Raymond, was 20, but we were close to Thomas Albert's second wife, Olga, Lady Blamey.

I remember with great fondness our times together at their home in Punt Road and later, our frequent visits to his bedside at Heidelberg Repat Hospital. I remember a loving, jolly but slightly awesome, sort-of large gentleman.

Thomas Albert Blamey's service to his country spanned four decades and two World Wars. What else can we say about him?

That he was and remains Australia's most decorated soldier.

That he landed at Anzac Cove on 25th April 1915 as a Major, led skirmishes against the enemy and by May 1918, at age 34, he was Brigadier General Staff to General John Monash.

That he, with Monash, planned and executed famous allied victories on the Western Front in the battle of Hamel in May 1918 and the battle of Amiens. Using troops, tanks, artillery and aircraft in concert, these turned the tide decisively in the Allies' favour and, it is widely accepted, foreshortened the war by 12 months.

That, after World War I, he chaired the committee that established the RAAF, refereeing between the two existing services and intervening to secure agreement.

That he was the only allied commander to retain command from the beginning to, six years later, the end of World War II.

That he commanded over half a million troops during those years at any one time. General Monash commanded a maximum of 200 thousand in the previous war.

That he, with Sydney Rowell, was the architect of the near-miraculous allied retreat from Greece in 1941. In the words of the Australian official historian:" the fighting withdrawal of

more than 300 miles, generally along a single road, with the loss of but one fighting unit, was an outstanding military achievement”.

That he played a vital, hands-on part in preventing the fall of Papua New Guinea and the possible isolation of our nation.

That he is the only Australian Field Marshall.

What did other military and national leaders say about him?

They found him a rare commander and leader, blunt, decisive and brilliant. Here are some reports.

General Sir John Monash in World War I: “Brigadier-General Blamey had an extraordinary facility for self-effacement. A man of inexhaustible industry, nothing was ever too much trouble. He worked late and early and set a high standard for the large Corps Staff of which he was the head. I was able to lean on him in times of trouble, stress and difficulty, to a degree which was an inexpressible comfort to me”.

Major-General Cooke regarding Blamey’s Second World War role: “the nature of his responsibilities and span of control was unique and unbelievably demanding - not only operations in the field but at the same time the day-to-day organisation, administration and training of the Army. This did not occur in other armies”.

Prime Minister Menzies:” None matched him in power of command, a quality hard to define but impossible to mistake when you meet it”.

Arthur Calwell said of him in the role: ‘The next man to Blamey is like a curate to a bishop”’.

British Field Marshall Wavell, as C-in-C Middle East: “He was probably the best soldier we had in the Middle East. His military knowledge was unexampled and he was a positive, firm and a very satisfactory commander”.

Major General Sir Edmund Herring, former Lieutenant Governor of Victoria and renowned jurist: “he made it plain that he had considered how each of us was likely to treat and care for his men. This was always one of his main concerns”.

And, later, about New Guinea: ”He was a great man to serve. You always knew where you stood with him. He expected a great deal of his subordinates, but he was always loyal in return and would always accept responsibility for their mistakes”.

General Douglas MacArthur: “I have always felt that his services in the Second World War were not sufficiently recognized. What he did cannot be overestimated, and his contribution

to the defeat of Japan marked him as one of the great soldiers of our time. Australia and, indeed, the whole free world owes him a debt of gratitude.”

General Sir Francis Hasset, AC, KBE: “Blamey was a brilliant, tough commander...outstanding in the complex military political sphere of high command.”

General Cooke again: “He fought hard to protect the integrity of the Australian Army from the interference of and subjugation to its allies. He continually resisted powerful pressures emanating from Churchill himself in the Middle East and from MacArthur in the Pacific campaigns to use Australian troops in ways he considered against the best interests of this country and particularly of its soldiers.”

They, and many others, say much more about our C-in-C.

So why is his name all but forgotten today, not taught in schools, hardly commemorated in public institutions and even (until recently improved under Dr. Brendan Nelson), why have his memorabilia and fine portraits by famous artists lain buried in the vaults of The Australian War Memorial?

When I was growing up and attending University here in the 1950s and 60s, anytime I gave my name, at a counter, on the phone, in meeting a stranger, it was immediately known, one sensed a warm glow. Very often I would be asked: “are you any relation”? There was great pride in Blamey in our country.

These days I am asked to *spell* my name. Many adults I respect have never heard of TAB. Others have gained the impression he was no good.

And worse, among those who do read about Australia’s war efforts, especially surrounding the defence of Australia in 1942/43, why do they know only of the superficial, sometimes defamatory writings of our “pop” historians? These authors, lacking thorough or original research, lack balance. They have ignored Blamey’s extraordinary achievements in two World Wars, his passionate belief in and support of his soldiers, his sole ability to properly stand up for and demand an independent Australian armed force, his pivotal role in saving our nation from occupation.

It is sad that Australia’s greatest soldier has been so treated. But, in my view, it goes much deeper than that. It denigrates the hundreds of thousands who served under him, the country’s leaders who tasked him and relied on him and Australia’s name as a no-nonsense, fiercely independent, brave, resourceful and resolute fighting nation.

If this recent flurry of writing was accurate, would Blamey have been so loyally supported, would the largest number of Australian Army divisions ever commanded have followed him unwaveringly?

Would 20,000 people have filed through this hallowed building on May 30, 1951 where Blamey lay in state? Would 10 Generals and 4 thousand troops have escorted the gun-carriage which bore him and would 300 thousand people have lined our streets from this Shrine through the city in respectful, tearful silence?

Menzies said in 1972: "Only a big man can stand the test of time. It is a touchstone of Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey's quality that his place among the great Australians is more secure today than it has ever been...."

Menzies continued: "In the twenty years since his death in 1951 his actions, character and personality have been subjected to the most rigorous and exhaustive scrutiny. Official and unofficial war historians have returned their findings on him; his admirers and detractors (and he had more of each than most) have written of him with force and candor. Blamey has come through it larger of stature than ever".

But that was 40 years ago. As I suggest, sadly, outside of the military, that is less apparent today.

Finally, General Cooke again: "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 but passed on to future generations to help establish and develop our ongoing traditions".

I say, hear hear. Let's revere our national heroes. Let's recognise and applaud merit, strength in leadership, courage, loyalty. Let the tall poppies stand and so encourage new ones to grow.

To conclude, we, the small Blamey family (only one TAB son survived the second war so that two grandsons and three great-grandchildren remain) we are moved to see this fine exhibition take place. Surely it will start to redress the balance on Blamey. We applaud the Shrine of Remembrance, Jean McAuslan, the exhibition's curator Mr. Neil Sharkey and all those who have faith in Blamey and what he stood for.

Thank you for your indulgence.