Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey: Australia's most promoted, but least appreciated soldier

An address to the United Services Institute
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Contents

Today's topic does not lend itself to spelling out either Blamey's successes or his mistakes.

If your interest has been whetted, then read David Horner's biography. However, it may help you to understand the man better if I mention the following:

- **His whole military career was characterized by his concern for Australian lives and interests.**
- **Monash, who knew him as well as anyone, described his mind as 'prehensile'. For example, it was he who, on Gallipoli, immediately perceived the potential of the periscope rifle.**
- **He and Monash conceived the first modern battle – Hamel, which changed the conduct**

of war.

- **He thought and spoke about the future of Australia. The Australian National University was one of his brainchild's.**

- **The steps he took on the health front were quite outstanding. His seeking for advice; and willingness to implement unusual measures beat malaria. He even brought Lord Florey to Australia.**

- **He was behind the emphasis on training and the creation of training facilities which played a major part in the success of the Australian Army.**

Major-General Gordon Maitland AO OBE RFD ED (Retd)

The United Services Institute presents the Blamey Oration biannually in conjunction with the Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey Memorial Fund. The oration perpetuates the memory of Sir Thomas Blamey, Australia's highest ranking serviceman and, arguably, its greatest soldier. In this oration, which marks the 54th anniversary of the death of the Field Marshall on 27 May 1951, General Maitland reviews several controversial relationships and events in Blamey's career and, in seeking to set the record straight, presents new evidence from his own research on the Kokoda campaign.

I'm somewhat overwhelmed to see this impressive attendance and I thank you all for making the effort which, in a way, is a tribute to Blamey. The Blamey Oration is intended to foster debate on key military and strategic issues, but I feel that from time to time our attention should return to the man himself.

As I note that many of you are my friends, I would additionally thank you for your loyalty. I am thus emboldened to make an unusual request. Would you please expunge from your memories your past reading and list today with a completely open mind. Why? You might well ask. Because to an extent you have been influenced by writers who have allowed themselves to be influenced. They have done well in bringing us splendid descriptions of terrain, events and experiences, but some have produced conclusions beyond their competence to make. Think of all that has been written about the Kokoda Trail, including the published deductions, conclusions and accusations. Yet you will fail to find any worthwhile analysis of the conduct of operations.

Also, the influences which shape a commander's decisions range well beyond those that can later be identified by historians, some of whom lack understanding of the culture of the army. Even when comprehensive information is held, judgements will usually be subjective – was a heavy penalty motivated by vindictiveness, or was it simply warranted in the circumstances of the time? Early in his career (1978) our eminent military historian Professor Horner wrote of 'the necessity for a great deal of evidence to ensure that reputations are not disparaged unfairly' – but did other authors read that? I think not!

Interpretation of Australian military events of sixty-odd years ago was unfortunately shaped by the only first hand account of a senior officer that was available for many years – General Rowell's 1974 autobiography. Not surprisingly, he presented himself in a very favourable

light and succeeded in tarnishing the image of Blamey, who was no longer alive to provide his version – not that he would have chosen so to do. The book was so santised that it doesn't mention Rowell's removal of Potts from command of the 21st Brigade.

Generals have special problems; they operate in a complex political environment under unique stresses which can be fully appreciated only by those who have had the experience. Whereas a battalion commander is only accountable to his brigade commander, General Blamey was accountable to his military commander, to his Minister for the Army (Forde), to his Prime Minister (Curtin), and to some other ministers. The media and subsequently the public thought he was accountable to them too. There are those at lower ranks who may choose to play politics, but general is the rank at which soldierly forthrightness is not enough. Examples are not hard to find. Consider the case of General Bennett. General Sturdee, the Chief of the General Staff, advised Blamey that he had misgivings about Bennett's escape from Singapore, prompting Blamey to decide to convene an inquiry. However, on that very same day Bennett was commended by the Minister for the Army who, considering himself senior to Blamey, was always loath to consult him. In the circumstances, Prime Minister Curtin, obviously concerned about public reaction, told Blamey to desist. Political considerations will usually override military ones. Later, when General Percival (Bennett's commander in Malaya) criticized Bennett's departure from Singapore, Blamey was obliged to hold an inquiry.

An American general once said*: 'The higher I climb the ladder the more 'arse' people see to kick'*. I accept that responsibility has to be taken for errors and omissions; however it is inappropriate that criticism of generals is usually freely expressed without a sense of proportion being exposed.

Setting the Record Straight

Moving on to the actual topic, you will be aware that it is 60 years since the end of the Second World War. Last year various ex-service organizations were considering what the focus of this year should be. My friend (a member present here today) John Allen, the son of famous Major General Tubby Allen, suggested that it should be 'Setting the Record Straight'. That is something that hopefully, this talk may help to achieve – but in respect of Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey, someone whom John Allen is unlikely to have in mind.

To a minor extent, I am moved to do so by a feeling of guilt. I was a 19-year old sergeant when Blamey flew into my brigade. It took absolutely no time for the news to circulate that he had brought 'some grog for the officers'. It is incredible to look back and remember how bitterly that news was received. To my discredit, I joined in the condemnation of Blamey. It was a reflection of how successful the media had been in poisoning people's minds about him. Quite obviously he couldn't bring liquor for the whole brigade and it was a courteous and thoughtful act to bring it for those with whom he would be spending the night. He was better received in places where officers had taken the trouble to brief the troops: this was particularly so when Blamey was being attacked by the politicians – a group not held in high esteem by Australian soldiers. Indeed, soldiers had a lot for which to be thankful to Blamey, as his consideration of them was outstanding. At the very start of the war, he had told his senior officers that he had selected them *'because I think you will look after the troops. This is my chief concern.'* I have read criticism of even that praiseworthy

comment, which indicates the extent to which even thinking people have allowed themselves to be prejudiced.

As this sad story progresses you will come to realize what an undeservedly maligned person Blamey was. The media were the principal offenders for two simple reasons – bad stories sell papers; and Blamey's peccadilloes set him up as an easy target.

About Blamey

As this is about Blamey a brief description is warranted. He was born near Wagga Wagga in 1884, one of ten children of a drover (he obviously didn't drove enough!). He became a teacher, and, as an additional activity, he became a cadet officer. This led him to the regular army and to his being the first Australian to pass Staff College examinations. This took him to Quetta in India and, when the Great War commenced, to appointment as a major on the headquarters of the Australian Imperial Force's (AIF) famous 1st Division. He landed at Anzac at 7.20 a.m. on 25 April 1915, and the official historian, Bean commended his work and bravery. He went on to be a brigadier and Monash's highly regarded chief staff officer on the Australian Corps in 1918.

Subsequently he became Deputy Chief of the General Staff. In 1925, he left the army to become Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police; however, he served on in the militia. Although he was obliged to resign from the police in 1936, he was Menzies' choice in 1939 as the commander of the 2nd AIF.

He had a unique presence, some say 'radiating power', and, in 1942, he was recalled from the Middle East to Australia to the new position of commander-in-chief of the Australian Army, which he steered to reach a peak of 14 divisions. It may surprise you to know that 1 in 10 Australians served under him. Almost on his death bed, he was appointed field marshall.

Blamey's Dark Side

Blamey has his shortcomings: he drank heavily, but not so as to detract from his work (one of his aides said he had 'the body of a bull' and quite clearly he had incredible stamina), and he enjoyed amorous adventures. When he decided 'to party', he would have no compunction about doing so at a night club where he would be rubbing shoulders with junior officers. But as Prime Minister Curtin said to the press on 17 July 1942: *'When Blamey was appointed, the government was seeking a military leader, not a Sunday School teacher'*.

It did not help that Blamey, while Chief Commissioner of the Victoria Police, had his name linked to a brothel raid and, later had been forced to resign for having released information which he knew to be untrue. Blamey placed loyalty very high in his rating of personal qualities and his problems in the police force arose from his being too loyal and endeavouring to protect the reputation of others.

Blamey's 'Achilles' Heel' was his complete disregard for what others thought about him. His concern for his troops was outstanding, but he never sought their approbation; he treated Forde, the Minister for Defence, with contempt (but this started with Forde, not

Blamey); and completely neglected public relations. But this was also his strength – in the Middle East he fought so strongly (and loyally to his government and the Australian Army) that he confided to his friend Major General Burston that he was *'the most hated man in the Middle East'*. Nothwithstanding, both of his principal opponents, Wavell and Auchinleck, held him in high regard – this according to Lord Casey and Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke. Wavell referred to him as the *'best soldier in the Middle East'*.

The Media

Returning to the media; their campaign against him started when he fought with characteristic vigour, but with characteristic tactlessness, to protect the Victoria Police. *Smith's Weekly* described the campaign as *'the most sensational ever conducted by the regimented Press against a public official'*. Famous correspondent, Chester Wilmot, added fuel when Blamey received command of the 2nd AIF; Wilmot referred to him as a '*crook*', and circulated a story of Blamey getting a commission from a laundry contract. Later, in reporting the Greek campaign, he ignored Blamey's farsightedness in identifying the evacuation beaches, gave Rowell the credit for the withdrawal and claimed that Blamey left Greece early *'against the advice and in spite of pleading of his senior officers'* – this despite General Wavell having ordered Blamey to leave and General Wilson having dismissed Blamey's protests. Wilmot later raised rumours of Blamey profiting from picture contracts and canteens, but never had any evidence for his accusations. Indeed, in any rebuttal is needed, it can be found in Blamey's rejection of a very large sum of money to write his memoirs, because, as he explained*: 'They would inevitably damage reputations'*. On 4 July 1942, *Smith's Weekly* went so far as to advocate firing Blamey.

At war's end The Bulletin of 12 December 1945, finally extended an apology to Blamey. It stated:

> *"He was watched continually by an unfriendly press bent upon commanding his army for him and upon assuring that he should not be accorded any of the privileges which commanders normally are accorded by common consent in progress of keeping their health and comfort." It added: "[He] gave Australia equable military leadership, and he did it without the unfaltering support of Ministers, press or public. On the contrary, strong influences were at work all the time to divide him from his troops, to undermine his authority over them, even to incite their derision of him"*

Adverse publicity was such that only for a few short periods was Blamey able to operate without the likelihood of his being dismissed. However, he did make it and thus became the Allies' only commander who kept his command from the start of the war to the finish.

The Senior Officers

Sowing the rumours and the seeds of dissension was an incredible collection of senior officers. Discipline is the cornerstone of military forces yet this strange group obviously thought that stopped with the troops. As distinguished historian Jeffrey Grey wrote*: '[A]t times, it must be wondered whether some of Australia's senior officers ever put as much energy into fighting the Germans and Japanese as they did into quarrelling with one another.'* Such rivalries were not unique to Australia.; that between MacArthur and the

United States Navy was worse, and, if reports be true, inter-service rivalry in Japan was even more so.

Most historians refer to staff corps versus militia rivalry but, as senior officers sought to achieve their own advancement, both the staff corps and the militia showed no reluctance to denigrate their own. The so called 'revolt of the general' (regular and militia) was aimed at Lavarack (a regulear) and Bennett (a militiaman). Senior officers should be ambitious, but it should be a matter more of hoping to receive acknowledgment as a result of performance, rather than agitating or, even worse, conniving, for it.

It gives me no pleasure to talk in the following terms about a former Chief of the General Staff, but Rowell's behaviour towards Blamey was appalling, and it is no less appalling that many have glossed over it. When Blamey told Rowell (his principal staff officer) that he had been ordered out of Greece, Rowell responded *'I don't believe you'*. Rowell's conduct permeated the headquarters, and he later spread the story that *'Blamey showed the white feather and ran out of the country in a plane'*. General Lavarack seized on that and so the damage to Blamey spread. That Rowell continued his denigration of Blamey in correspondence with Vasey was unpardonable disloyalty, as was his later lack of balance towards Blamey in New Guinea. He used terms like *'crafty gangster'* and *'evil cancer'* in referring to Blamey. He wrote to another general (Clowes) that *'I would never have believed a senior officer would have taken what I said to him'*. Yet, in his autobiography, Rowell accuses Blamey of magnifying his remarks when reporting to the Prime Minister.

Appropos Rowell's accusation of cowardice; history makes it clear that Blamey performed with great gallantry on Gallipoli, and there is overwhelming evidence that his moral courage was second to none. Quite obviously Wavell couldn't afford to risk the capture of Australia's top soldier and Rowell's inability to recognize that situation and other incidents suggest that he lacked politico-military awareness.

It was shrewd of Rowell to write his own biography for it obviously dissuaded today's critical military historians from undertaking the task. Rowell makes much of the 25th Brigade not arriving in Papua until 7 September 1942 (he wrote that they *'could have been in New Guinea in July or even in June'*), yet he would have been aware that Blamey was following MacArthur's wishes for the experienced 7th Division to be kept for his future offensive operations; also on 21 August 1942 Rowell told Blamey that he didn't want the 25th Brigade; he only asked for it on 2 September, implying that up until then he had seen his forces as adequate. His friend, Vasey, saw him becoming 'a bit full of himself', and it is clear that Rowell was intent on bringing Blamey down, showing no gratitude whatsoever to his mentor who, in October 1939, had picked him out as a lieutenant colonel, and had made him into a lieutenant general by April 1942. The seer total of Blamey's achievements proves Rowell to have been malignantly biased, and it is my belief that critical study would reveal Rowell as a character quite different form the victim popularly portrayed.

Blamey is accused of being a 'hater', but two months after the Greek campaign he had sent back splendid *competence* reports on Rowell and also on Bridgeford, who had also passed some denigrating remarks.

Later both Generals Vasey and Robertson would go behind Blamey's back and cause problems for him as they endeavoured to advance themselves, yet they trusted Blamey – everyone did. That was one of the keys to Blamey's success. Everyone respected his judgements; they trusted him, so that there was wholehearted support for his plans and the Australian Army found a confidence that played a large part in its success.

Surely what MacArthur told Prime Minister Curtin on 17 July 1942 said it all. Curtin wrote:

> *"General MacArthur said that had heard much loose talk from some people about General Blamey and he regretted to say that much of it had originated from officers in the Australian Army. Other Australian officers coveted the post of Commander-in-Chief and had made representations against General Blamey. He had also received anonymous letters on the subject.'*

Having said that, MacArthur was playing his own game.

General MacArthur and his Cohorts

General MacArthur had been an abysmal failure in the Phillipines, but was theatrical, egoistic, and dedicated to his own self-aggrandisment, never allowing truth to stand in the way. Many of MacArthur's press releases were not only distortions of fact, but fictitious, prompting Jack Galloway, in his illuminating book *The Odd Couple*, to dub them 'Ripping Yarns'. When General Eisenhower (later U.S. President) was asked whether he knew MacArthur, he replied*: 'Yes, I studied drama under him for some years.'*

Although Australians in senior positions held prudish reservations about Blamey, they were completely unconcerned about MacArthur, whose private life was scarcely less sullied; and who turned a blind eye to his senior American officers not only living with Australian mistresses but putting them on the payroll, which incidentally was met by Australia.

The government was without moral fibre, was frantic, and was amateurish. It completely surrendered to MacArthur, handing operational control of Australian armed forces to a foreigner and abrogating Australian contribution to strategic direction – incredible acts for which Shedden must share the blame. (Shedden was the Defence Secretary, whom I will describe later). In an historical article, on 6 December 1972, the Sydney Morning Herald put the government's sycophantic approach to MacArthur in these words: *'You take over what you need of the entire resources of the country and we will have what you leave'*.

Unfortunately MacArthur was haunted by his failure in the Phillipines and his humiliating departure from Corregidor; as a consequence he was fanatical about re-conquering those islands. The United States Navy, on the other hand, was no less haunted by the humiliation that had been inflicted on it at Pearl Harbour, and also was bent on a redemptive crusade. It became a race, and MacArthur was almost paranoic in wanting to win the right to the starting position for the liberation of the Phillipines. His consequent ruthlessness did not meet the standards Australians look for in their leaders. Stephen Taafe wrote regarding the loss of American lives at Wadke-Sarmi: *'MacArthur sacrificed those men not so much to win the war as to win his race with the Navy'*.

In was in MacArthur's interests to keep the Australian Government under pressure, and he didn't want any interference from Blamey who seemed to be the only one to realize that MacArthur had no interest in Australia's future, only in his own. On the other hand, he saw Blamey as far superior to the other Australian generals and he needed both Blamey and the Australian Army in order to achieve his aims. Being devious, he worked to retain Blamey, but to curb him. In particular he was a master of public relations and was determined that all good publicity would go to himself.

Blamey served MacArthur loyally, but MacArthur would repay his loyalty only so far as it suited himself. MacArthur was responsible for Blamey being sent to Papua by Prime Minister Curtin, to be the scapegoat in the event of an adverse outcome there, and later he worked to delay Blamey's return to Australia. Later still, as American strength built up and reliance on the Australian Army reduced, MacArthur sidelined Blamey as much as possible *'by stealth and by the employment of subterfuges that were undignified and at times abusrd'* – the official historian's words. However it must be conceded that MacArthur was acting in accordance with guidance he had received from Washington.

Curtin had given MacArthur complete control over the media and he took full advantage of it. All successes were attributed to 'Allied Forces', even if there had been no Americans there, and MacArthur was presented as the successful general. Favourable mention was never made of Blamey or other Australian generals; but in this MacArthur was even handed – he never mentioned his own generals either. It was the opposite when there was hint of events not so favourable. MacArthur never accepted blame for anything and was always quick to identify scapegoats. In Papua, it was the Australians, notwithstanding that he owed everything to them. When Shedden asked MacArthur why the beachheads campaign had lasted so long he quickly blamed Blamey. It follows that while MacArthur ensured that Blamey survived, his manipulation of publicity tarnished Blamey's image even further.

You will be aware that MacArthur finally got his comeuppance; he was fired during the Korean War by President Truman, who observed (and I don't want the admirals here to smirk):

> *"I fired him because he wouldn't respect the authority of the President. I didn't fire him because he was a dumb son-of-a-bitch, although he was, but that's not against the law for Generals. If it was, half to three-quarters of them would be in jail."*

Truman seems to have disliked generals even more that Prime Minister Curtin.

The Politicians

Before Curtin came to office Menzies was prime minister, and it was Menzies who appointed Blamey to command the second AIF. Thereby, Blamey was prejudiced in the eyes of the opposition Labor Party. The trade union movement had already found against Blamey because of his handling of strikes when police commissioner and, as the movement was closely linked to the Labor Party, Blamey was left with ground to make up when the party achieved government. Needless to say, it was not Blaymey's style to endeavour to do so. What is more, Curtin, the new prime minister, was a reformed

alcoholic and, as although puritanical, had been jailed for his conduct as a pacifist – hardly the qualities that would appeal to Blamey; or vice versa.

As Blamey stood head and shoulders above his competitors, Curtin had no choice other than to appoint Blamey as Australian commander-in-chief; however, it was a qualified appointment – the Defence Department was given the responsibility for war policy, and the War Conference which Curtin established, comprised only himself, MacArthur and the manipulative Shedden. What was worse, as mentioned earlier, MacArthur was given supreme command of the Australian services and control of the media.

It is interesting to speculate how another general might have fared, but the hierarchial system of the army was an anathema to the Labor Party and it is unlikely that another would have been received significantly better. Apart from a short period of two years the Labor Party had been in the political wilderness, so that it brought no experience to its new role. In addition, its members had been opposed not only to military service but to the military system, so that they lacked basic military knowledge – this in the middle of a war with the nation in crisis. Little wonder that *The Bulletin* chose to describe them as 'a government of novices'.

In February 1942, Curtin earned a reputation for being an outstanding wartime leader by standing firm against Churchill and insisting on the return to Australia of the 6th and 7th Divisions. In fact he had little choice; it is said that his chief of the general staff had threatened to resign if he didn't, and some of his ministers (plus many others) were in a state of funk. Not long after, when the news from Kokoda was at its worst, Beasley, the minister for Supply and Shipping, in his agitation, called out: *'Moresby is going to fall. Send Blamey up there and let him fall with it.'* At MacArthur's opportunistic suggestion and in ignorance of what a commander-in-chief's job entailed, that is exactly what Curtin did – sent him to Moresby. If credit should go to anyone for how an ill-prepared and dispirited Australia emerged from its greatest crises, it should go to its battle winning soldiers, under the command of Blamey.

The government could scarcely have been more loyal to and supportive of MacArthur; and consequently belittling of Blamey. Even in January 1945, when suppression of news about the Australian Army was a major concern, acting Prime Minister Chifley would not approach MacArthur to loosen his stranglehold on the media. Rather, an attack was launched at Blamey. This was the government which had cut Blamey off from the media, yet it was Calwell, the then Minister for Information, who told the media that Blamey was to blame. It was all too much for Blamey, who, in his best public relations manner, called him a liar! Not withstanding, even Calwell was constrained to say: 'The next man to Blamey is like a curate to a bishop'.

MacArthur continued to bamboozle the government. When his Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington were reluctant to approve his Australian-manned Balikpapan invasion, he sold it to them by saying that cancellation would produce '*grave repercussions with the Australian government and people'*. Yet, when Blamey finally prodded Chifley to query MacArthur about the expedition, the misleading answer that it had been *'ordered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff'* not only mollified Chifley but increased the lack of confidence in Blamey.

The government was never wholeheartedly behind Blamey and the continuing thought given to his replacement, even though it never happened, was so well known that it detracted from Blamey's achievements which, clearly, the *'government of novices'* had never paused to appreciate. There were always people, like Shedden, volunteering comments on military matters, and the government was only too willing to listen.

The six months following 27 March 1942, when Blamey took up his appointment, are revealing. The pre-war Military Board had failed abysmally in preparing the Australian Army for war, and the enormity of Blamey's job was beyond imagination. The army had to be restructured and reorganized and the arrival of American troops in large numbers had to be absorbed. The AIF had been used to being looked after by the British and the new need to be self-sufficient created tremendous logistical, communication, training, intelligence and security pressures; munitions also were a major difficulty and every step had financial ramifications. In addition, much was happening – air and submarine attacks, the war in the north, and the never ending conferences (particularly those demanded by the politicians). At the same time, Blamey was commanding Allied Land Forces in which role he had to cope with MacArthur's paranoia about beating the United States Navy. Victory in the 4 June Battle of Midway ended the possibility of an assault against Australia, and attention was concentrated on New Guinea. There, by the end of August, the Battle of Milne Bay had been won and the only problem was the Kokoda Trail. Despite the Australian's steady retreat, the forces that Blamey had assembled allowed no possibility of defeat, as Blamey assured the Advisory War Council. The trouble was that the government's inexperience and alarm was too deep-seated and, when MacArthur expressed concern, the politicians turned on Blamey.

The end result was, as mentioned earlier, Curtin's 17 September dispatch of Blamey to Port Moresby. Then, adding to that disgraceful decision, Curtin told the media that he had sent Blamey to New Guinea *'to give him one final chance'*. To denigrate and undermine his commander-in-chief in that completely undeserved way was shameful.

But even worse was in store when Curtin became ill, for Chifley, Dr Evatt and others saw the army as a fascist organization and Blamey as having the worst characteristics of that regime. Finally, Forde, the Minister for the Army, vented his spite when he gave little notice for Blamey in retiring him after the war. Blamey, not to be outdone and 'still the diplomat', left Forde in no doubt as to what he thought of him and his government – and little wonder!

The Civilian Bureaucracy

Firmly in command of the civilian defence bureaucracy was Sir Frederick Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence from 1937 to 1956. He believed himself to be a military and strategic expert, not by virtue of a six months stint overseas in the Great War as a lieutenant in the Pay Corps, but by his attendance at the Imperial Defence College.

He was a great admirer of the British way and was a disciple of his British counterpart, Sir Maurice Hankey; so much so that he was cleverly dubbed by some wit as *'the pocket hanky'*. Hanky taught Shedden how to wield power behind the scenes. It was Shedden who had been a strong advocate of the Singapore strategy, despite a convincing criticism of it by

the Australian Army but, in the manner of MacArthur, he succeeded in putting the blame on Britain when the Australian Army was proved correct and Singapore *'came tumbling down'*.

Shedden was one who swallowed MacArthur's public relations 'hook, line and sinker', going so far as to commend MacArthur's inspiring defence of the Phillipines. He didn't seek to talk to United States High Commissioner Sayre, who was evacuated to Australia en route to the United States, and who was embittered against MacArthur. Perhaps Shedden knew on what side his bread was buttered, for his later knighthood was probably due to MacArhtur's suggestion to Curtin.

Professor Horner's biography of Shedden, *Defence Supremo*, reveals him to be untruthful when it suited and dedicated to *'blowing his own trumpet'*. Indicative of how Shedden was; he persuaded the government to request a Royal Air Force officer to inspect and report on the Royal Australian Air Force *without telling the Chief of the Air Staff*.

It is intriguing that the Curtin government had MacArthur and Shedden knighted, but not one Australian serviceman.

There is no denying that Shedden was a most capable and hard working public servant, but like all in the senior bureaucracy, he had an appetite for power. I give you that background so that you may better understand when I tell you that he adopted the same tactics as MacArthur to Blamey – keep him, but in an inferior role.

General Wynter wrote of the civil staff:

> *"They take any and every opportunity to oppose the Commander-in-Chief. This has been their attitude virtually since November 1942 when Sinclair [the Secretary of the Army] first started his intrigue for replacing the C-in-C by an Army Council."*

Authors

It is interesting that authors have never wanted to pick up the odd supportive remark about Blamey. For example, were you aware that on Armistice Day (11 November) Blamey would arrive at his office early, close the door, and live with his thoughts until after 11 a.m.? Doesn't that reveal a person different from the one usually painted? Horner is an exception; in his valuable book, *Crisis of Command*, he says: *'Blamey always felt a certain loyalty to those officers who had served their country long and well, and through no fault of their own found themselves in situations that they were not equipped to handle'*.

Consider all the authors who have written about the Kokoda Trail. They are numerous, and everyone maligns Blamey, but based on what evidence? Remember that books, like newspapers, need to 'spiced up' to boost sales.

And what about the furore over Blamey's remarks to the 21st Brigade at Koitaki after the decimated brigade was withdrawn from the Kokoda Trail. Sadly, there is no proof of what Blamey said, but surely the first source one would go to would be the commander of the brigade. Yet no one ever asked Sir Ivan Dougherty. Ivan was my friend, and some will recall my giving the eulogy at his funeral. In his 'recollections' he wrote:

"In other parts of this narrative I have indicated that I am firm in my opinion that General Blamey's comments on the parade at Koitaki were given the wrong interpretation. I was alert in carefully listening to what he said.

He did use the term 'rabbits', but as I stood on parade I did not anticipate that the men of 21 Brigade would give his words the interpretation that he said the troops of 21 Brigade had 'run like rabbits'. He said the Jap had animal-like instincts. He said that while they stayed in their holes they would shoot anyone who moved near them. He said it was like shooting rabbits back home – we had to get them out of their burrows before we could get them.

General Blamey said words to the effect that: 'Brigadier Doughery has had troops under his command of whom he has every reason to be intensely proud, and I know he will be just as proud of the men of 21 Brigade'. Perhaps it might have been better if he had mentioned the men of 21 Brigade first, saying something like: 'I know Brigadier Doughery will be intensely proud of the men of 21 Brigade just as he has been intensely proud of the men he has commanded previously.

In General Vasey's war by David Horner, on page 220, it is written: 'Back in Port Moresby MacArthur and Blamey were in deep discussion about which formation to send, the 127th U.S. Regiment, the 21st Brigade under Ivan Dougherty, or perhaps the 41st U.S. Division from Australia. Blamey told MacArthur that 'he would rather put in more Australians, as he knew they would fight'. MacArthur therefore agreed to fly in the 21st Brigade.

This would most certainly appear to support my contention that General Blamey's address at the Koitaki Parade has been misconstrued."

Your Conclusion

It is difficult to know to whom to give the last word. General Eather was one of the brigadiers harried by Blamey on the Kokoda Trail, yet he wrote to his parents: *'To me it is disgraceful to think that a great man who has done what he has for Australia in the last six years should be open to attacks as he has been'*.

Then there was General Morsehead. Curtin had chosen him as a successor to Blamey *'should unfortunately anything happen to him' [like being 'fired'*] Moreshead, when told, wrote to Curtin: '*I do sincerely trust that the occasion will not arise. General Blamey is truly great Commander and it would be a national calamity if he were to become a casualty.'*

Perhaps the most significant tribute was paid by MacArthur – not in his memoirs in which he used the words '*of highest quality'* to describe Blamey, but by his 1948 action in inviting Blamey to visit him in Japan, a very rare act of gratitude completely out of character with MacArthur's normal conduct.

Today's topic does not lend itself to spelling out either Blamey's successes or his mistakes. If your interest has been whetted, then read David Horner's biography. However, it may help you to understand the man better if I mention the following:

- His whole military career was characterized by his concern for Australian lives and interests.

- Monash, who knew him as well as anyone, described his mind as ‘prehensile’. For example, it was he who, on Gallipoli, immediately perceived the potential of the periscope rifle.

- He and Monash conceived the first modern battle – Hamel, which changed the conduct of war.

- He thought and spoke about the future of Australia. The Australian National University was one of his brainchild’s.

- The steps he took on the health front were quite outstanding. His seeking for advice; and willingness to implement unusual measures beat malaria. He even brought Lord Florey to Australia.

- He was behind the emphasis on training and the creation of training facilities which played a major part in the success of the Australian Army.

The question you might wish to address is – what motivated him? There are those who focus on his private life and believe he lusted for power and the trappings that accompanied it. Others believe he was a patriot, who stuck to the job, despite his abominable treatment, because of his dedication to the army and his determination to preserve it from mishandling by a lesser person.

The subjective judgement is one for you to make; however whatever conclusion you reach, you must also conclude that we were extremely fortunate to have had him; that he deserved to be a field marshal; and that he didn’t deserve to be so ill appreciated.

The Author:

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