

Some myths relating to the promotion to field marshal of Sir Thomas Blamey in 1950



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General Sir Thomas Blamey who, during World War II, had been commander-in-chief of the Australian Military Forces and, concurrently, commander of the Allied Land Forces in the South-West Pacific Area, was recalled from retirement in 1950 and promoted to field marshal. Recent research in the Australian archives has revealed that the accepted story surrounding his promotion contained several myths, including that the British War Office resisted the promotion.

Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey has remained a controversial figure in death as in life. This is particularly so in relation to the award of his field marshal's baton in 1950. Even today, there are those who, in discussing the current campaign to promote Sir John Monash posthumously to field marshal (e.g. Fischer 2014), will quip with a degree of seriousness: *Well, take it away from that... Blamey and give it to Monash.* As Australia's only native-born field marshal, though, and the only person promoted to that rank in recognition of his service in the Australian Military Forces, it is only natural that his promotion is used as the precedent and the reference point for the promotion to field marshal of future candidates.

A level of myth and legend has crept into discussions about Blamey's promotion, especially that the British War Office resisted the promotion, possibly on grounds of Blamey's Australian nationality and his retired status. In truth, the British War Office had not even been consulted. Whilst in some ways these are minor errors, nevertheless they are significant when field marshal promotions are again in the news. While these errors can be traced back to statements by Blamey's official biographer, John Hetherington², whose two biographies of Blamey stand as landmarks (Hetherington 1954; 1973), he made only a passing reference to the issue in a single paragraph. By reference to the official Australian archives of the time, now publicly available³, in this essay I shall seek to dispel these myths.

Background to the Myths

In defence of Hetherington, the files relating to the promotion were still classified and closed to the public in 1954 and 1973. Hetherington had to rely, as official

biographer, on posing questions to Defence Department bureaucrats who would then provide answers without providing names or background details.

This would have posed two problems for the historian. Without access to the primary material, an historian has no sense of the context of the documents and must rely on the bureaucrat not only to be accurate but to also convey an understanding of the implications of what is contained in the file. A minor error here can become magnified in the final product.

The second problem is that the historian has to take the bare material and give it substance as part of an overall story. To do this, historians generalise, extrapolate, create assumptions or deductions from the bland facts – in other words 'join the dots'. This, of course, requires an historian to have not only the context but an understanding of the background to the context. It is here that a series of minor errors or misconceptions crept into the Blamey biography.

In dealing with the difficulties in promoting a retired officer in poor health to the rank of field marshal, Hetherington begins by discussing the decision by the Australian prime minister, Robert Menzies, newly in office, to ask the Governor-General to approach His Majesty the King to promote Blamey to field marshal.

The background to this decision was the determination of the prime minister to ensure that senior soldiers were rewarded for their wartime services as he felt that the nation had been somewhat remiss after World War I in this matter. The Labour government of the wartime years had refused knighthoods to a significant

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²J. A. Hetherington was an Australian journalist and World War II correspondent in North Africa. His reports were published in newspapers in Australia, by *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, and by the *New York Times* and the North American Newspaper Alliance. He covered the ANZAC Corps withdrawal from Greece. At the time of his first book on Blamey, he was deputy editor of *The Argus*. He later left journalism for full-time writing, in particular biographies.

³Until 1983, files were closed for at least 50 years from the point of accession by the National Archives. There are National Archives Offices in each state and the Australian War Memorial is a separate branch office of the National Archives. In 1983, the time-frame was reduced in general to 30 years and, since 2010, it has been reduced to 20 years. Some records are still restricted for longer and some may have material still regarded as current redacted from the files. In addition, while released, all files have to be inspected to ensure that they do not contain sensitive material; thus, a file maybe listed but marked 'not yet assessed' and thus not be available publically (NAA MT 1131/1, A274/1/57 and NAA MT 1131/1, A274/2/3 (1952-1954).

number of senior officers in the period 1941–1949, yet it had not inserted any other decorations in lieu⁴. Despite suggestions during and at the end of the war that Blamey be promoted to field marshal, this too had been refused by the government. Menzies set out to rectify these omissions, at least in part.

What Hetherington did not cover, perhaps due to lack of access to the files, was a discussion in Canberra prior to the approach to the King. Here it was pointed out to the prime minister that, constitutionally, Australia could appoint its own field marshals. Menzies, however, was adamant that, for reasons of prestige, the award should be seen as equally prestigious as one to a British officer – therefore, he wanted the King to sign off on it⁵.

With the files classified, Hetherington was allowed to pose questions to departmental officials. He was presumably told that there had been difficulties with Great Britain that seemed to relate to his nationality and retired status and that when Menzies countered with the example of Jan Christian Smuts, the objections had focused on his retired status. What he was unaware of, was that field marshal rank is a Royal appointment in the gift of the sovereign or, in Australia's case, made by the Governor-General on the advice of the prime minister or parliament. The only Defence Department/War Office involvement would be which posting he would fill on promotion and therefore what list he should be placed on.

Hetherington writes as follows: “The British reply, obviously drafted by the War Office, was not helpful; it said, in effect, that to make a Dominion soldier field marshal would be against policy” (Hetherington 1973: 393). Hetherington went on to describe how Menzies had fired back the example of Jan Christian Smuts, the South African promoted in 1941 from the retired list, which then led to: “London answered that question by producing a new argument: Blamey was ineligible because he was no longer on the army active list” (Hetherington 1973: 393-4).

All of which has passed into the received version of the events such that some later commentators have waxed lyrical about how the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir William Slim, was opposed to colonials receiving the accolade (Crocker 2011: 333; and sundry popular websites).

The Evidence of the Historic Record

None of the above is correct. Hetherington was poorly served by whoever answered his queries on this aspect

⁴Blamey had made recommendations to the government in 1943 and 1945 which were ignored.

⁵It is also possible that he had an eye on Canberra's relationship with London and Washington. From 1944 onwards, there had been a tendency for Britain to discuss issues that affected Australia and the Pacific with Washington without consultation with Australia. One example of this was Operation Coronet, the invasion of Japan, where Australia was presented with a *fait accompli* as to its proposed role. The field marshal issue could be seen as a reminder to London and Washington of Australia's contribution to victory in World War II (Long 1963: 549; Horner 1982: 414-418; Day 2003: 297-299).

of Blamey's career⁶. The files in the National Archives of Australia (NAA) show that the British War Office, in fact, had no comment on the matter nor should it have had. The correspondence was between the Australian governor-general and the Palace. The objection came from Sir Alan Lascelles ('Tommy' Lascelles for those devotees of the miniseries *The Crown*). In his position as private secretary to His Majesty the King, he was querying the matter before advising His Majesty about signing off on the promotion. The Imperial Conference of 1926 and the later Statute of Westminster 1931 meant that it was Australia's decision, not a decision for the British government or War Office⁷.

This had been made clear in the 1935-36 period when there had been a public campaign to promote Sir Harry Chauvel to field marshal. When the Palace was contacted, it responded by indicating that that such recommendations were the right of Australia, not of the Palace⁸. The initial response from the Palace in 1950 referred to “promoting a retired officer that would create undesirable precedents in Britain and the Empire”⁹. It was Australian officials who put the interpretation on it as being anti-colonial. It is clear that this is far from the truth. Lascelles cleared that matter up in following correspondence indicating that it was the retired status of the officer which was in question¹⁰. For someone as punctilious as Lascelles, it seems an odd concern as, between 1918 and 1941, four British officers were promoted to field marshal in retirement (five if Smuts is counted). It seems that he may have been concerned to head off pressure to promote certain retired officers in the United Kingdom. Lascelles went so far as to suggest that the issue might be resolved with the award of the Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath (GCB) rather than a field marshal's baton, as he could not conceive of how to get around the retirement issue¹¹. In any event, the issue of being a colonial was never in question.

It also should be noted that it was not until the issue had been resolved that the Chief of the Australian General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Sydney Rowell¹², was informed of what was about to happen and then only because his technical advice was required as to what list

⁶Note the file on his queries is marked 'not yet assessed' by the NAA and is not available to researchers.

⁷Report of the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee of the Imperial Conference 1926: “It is the right of the Government of each Dominion to advise the Crown on all matters relating to its own affairs. Consequently, it would not be in accordance with constitutional practice for advice to be tendered to His Majesty by His Majesty's Government ... [on a Dominion matter] against the views of the Government of that Dominion” (NAA: A4640/32). Also, Statute of Westminster Adoption Act 1942 (NAA: A1559, 1942/56) refers. This did not stop either the British government or War Office attempting to manipulate Australia in the interests of 'Imperial' defence post World War II.

⁸Melbourne *Herald* 3 December 1936 (NAA: B1535, 878/1/144).

⁹Cable, Lascelles to Governor General Sir William McKell, 9 March 1950, NAA: A663, 0156/1/180.

¹⁰Cable, Lascelles to Governor General Sir William McKell, 10 May 1950, NAA: A5954, 1508/8.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Nor had his predecessor, Lieutenant-General Sir Vernon Sturdee, been consulted.

Blamey should be placed on, on promotion. Even then his advice was overruled by the prime minister and by the secretary of the Department of Defence, Sir Frederick Shedden. In a memorandum to the defence minister dated 9 March 1950¹³, Shedden noted in paragraph 9 that, due to the confidential nature of the move (Blamey's promotion), the legal issues had not been discussed with the army at that point. Shedden further noted that when the King had accepted Australian field marshal rank in 1938, the military was not consulted at all.

Likewise, it would appear that the promotion of Birdwood to field marshal in 1925 was not discussed with the army prior to the announcement. Subsequent to the announcement and, in uncharted waters, faced with a need to justify the promotion of an officer who was an honorary general in the Australian Army, Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, then chief of the General Staff, held a promotion board in October 1925 to make a formal recommendation for Birdwood's promotion to field marshal. This then appeared in the Commonwealth Gazette¹⁴.

Rowell believed that Blamey could be promoted from the retired list and remain on that list. Whether the second part technically was possible is open to discussion, but it was not what the prime minister wanted¹⁵. Menzies wanted Blamey as a fully-fledged field marshal in the British tradition. Menzies noted in his letter of 23 May 1950 to the Governor-General: "In view of the really outstanding services of General Blamey, the Australian government desires that the promotion recommended should be made"¹⁶.

Blamey was restored to the active list with a great deal of manoeuvring and his promotion was announced in the King's Birthday Honours list for 1950 (8 June 1950). He was placed on the active list of the Citizen Military Forces¹⁷. It was not until December 1950 that all the paperwork was in place.

The other issue to be overcome was that of finances. Lascelles pointed out that the majority of field marshals, whilst on the active list, were not actually assigned to active duty and therefore were on the half-pay list¹⁸. As permanent members of the Royal Household¹⁹, this payment seems to have been handled by the Palace. Lascelles felt that, by the King giving assent to the promotion, it would make Blamey a British field marshal too – was it expected that the Palace would pick up the bill estimated at between £1600 – £1800 per annum? The Palace was assured that the position was to be

purely honorific with no charge on the public purse either in Britain or Australia²⁰. The irony here, of course, is that the Australian Cabinet in August 1950 voted Blamey a £3000 per annum gratuity for life from 8 June 1950²¹.

The precedent for return to the active list when overage and in retirement is that of General Sir John Monash who was returned to the active list to act as Australian ambassador or representative to the opening of the city of New Delhi as India's capital in 1931. He was exactly the same age (66) as Blamey on his return to the active list.

Conclusion

Ultimately, an entirely different picture of this promotion emerges from the historic record to that which is the current accepted version. Hetherington is not to blame for the discrepancies as he had no vision of the relevant files and the information provided to him on request was so spartan that it was easy to see how Hetherington developed his interpretation. It, however, does provide a cautionary tale about the need to be aware of the context behind events and how errors can pass into folklore.

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¹³Memorandum, Shedden to Defence Minister, 9 March 1950, NAA: A5954, 1508/8.

¹⁴Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. 2, 14 January 1926 – the process followed in this case is contained in NAA: MP367/1, 578/1/444.

¹⁵Letter, Menzies to Governor General Sir William McKell, 23 May 1950, NAA: A663, 0156/1/180.

¹⁶Cable, Lascelles to Governor General Sir William McKell, 9 March 1950, NAA: A663, 0156/1/180.

¹⁷Order in Council, 7 June 1950.

¹⁸There was no similar concept in the Australian Military Forces.

¹⁹All British field marshals become permanent members of the Royal Household for life.

²⁰Shedden note, 26 June 1950, NAA: A663, 0156/1/180.

²¹Cabinet minute, 29/31-8/1950.

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Pederson, Peter (1985). *Monash as military commander* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne).

Searle, Geoffrey (1982). *John Monash: a biography* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne).

The three most relevant National Archives of Australia files and their locations are:

A663, 0156/1/180, Promotion of General Sir Thomas Blamey to the rank of Field Marshal (Canberra).

A5954, 1508/8, Promotion of General Sir Thomas Blamey to the rank of Field Marshal (Canberra).

MP742/1, B/5/4043, Sir Thomas Blamey – Promotion to Field Marshal (Melbourne).