

Field Marshal Sir Thomas Albert Blamey

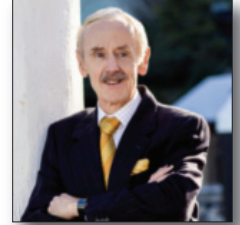
A career of challenges, conquests, and controversies

(Part II)

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The author, the grandson of Field Marshal Thomas Albert Blamey recounts the life and times of his grandfather, Australia's only Field Marshal who served in both, World War I and World War II as a wartime Commander.

Continued from Part I

Return to Australia 1942

Curtin called Blamey to return to Australia in March 1942. On the plane Blamey read Auchinleck's farewell note: 'I feel a very genuine regret at your going... you and your fine officers and men will leave a gap not to be filled easily ... I feel it a great privilege to have had them under my command and know how much I owe to them and to you'.

General Douglas MacArthur arrived in March as C-in-C of the South-West Pacific Area. 'The Australian Government did not know he was coming until he reached Darwin but were naturally overjoyed as it meant they could count on massive aid from the US. The acceptance of him as Supreme Commander was automatic' (Hetherington). Blamey told Carlyon "I think that's the best thing that could have happened for Australia". "Why?" asked Carlyon. "Well, MacArthur will be so far away from his own Government that he won't have any interference from them, and as far as our Government is concerned he won't take any notice of them" Blamey replied.

On arrival in Fremantle Blamey received a letter from Curtin advising the Government was appointing him C-in-C of the Australian Military Forces as a full General. Hetherington: 'A command far larger and far more complex than Monash's in the first war awaited him. For more than three years it was to demand all his energies of mind and body, he was to be more or less constantly under political and sectional attack'.

Blamey, appointed to command Allied Land Forces, and Douglas MacArthur were to work closely together until the end, though not without disagreements. Their collaboration was based on mutual respect and admiration for each other's experience and military acumen while Blamey 'understood well when to fight MacArthur on issues of command but when to keep his head'.

'With his Prime Minister, Blamey and Curtin's wartime partnership grew as months went on into something just short of a personal friendship, despite them being philosophically poles apart. Of all members of the Labor War Cabinet, it was Curtin who commanded Blamey's deepest respect and regard' (Hetherington). Blamey did not have much confidence in or regard for Minister Forde.

Hetherington: 'One of Blamey's most complex tasks was to weld the volunteer AIF and the conscript militia into a coherent fighting force. The former could be required to serve anywhere but militiamen only within certain rigidly defined limits. He carried multiple responsibilities, including control of the four branches of staff plus conduct of field operations'.

The Japanese landed in strength in Papua's Buna-Gona area in July 1942, their objective being to take Port Moresby by 21 September, 100 miles over the Owen Stanley range. They planned a two-headed assault, from the north over the range and from the east after a task force had taken Milne Bay and built it up as a base. Kokoda Village, 1200 feet above sea level was their first target. Outnumbered by a well-trained and better-armed enemy the Australians lost Kokoda to the Japanese by mid-August.

Australia was unprepared both for the size of the Japanese force and this new kind of warfare, in jungle conditions where the enemy was largely unseen, communications almost impossible, supply lines dependent on native carriers and sporadic air drops, troops obliged to move on foot through exceptionally challenging terrain.

Blamey had chosen Rowell as GOC 1 Australian Corps and promoted him to Lieutenant-General. He ordered Rowell from Brisbane to Port Moresby and also Major-General Allen's 7th Division to move to New Guinea at once.

The Japanese landed an amphibious force at Milne Bay on 25 August. In fierce and desperate fighting which lasted nearly a fortnight the defenders held on and in the end smashed the attack (totally disproving American officers on MacArthur's staff saying "The Australians can't fight and won't fight"). It was Japan's first defeat anywhere on land.

Anxiety still ran high in Australia such that Blamey received a 'request' from Minister Forde to go to Port Moresby 'to confer with General Rowell and ensure that everything is being done to render it impossible for the Japanese to make further progress across country to Port Moresby'. Blamey had not changed his good opinion of Rowell and after conferring and inspections he flew back two days later.

A few days after both Curtin and MacArthur instructed Blamey to go back to Port Moresby. "Canberra's lost it" Blamey told Major-General Burston. "I think highly of Rowell and I'm satisfied he has the situation under control" but he had to obey orders. 'Blamey had freely expressed confidence in his Commander both publicly and privately to the War Cabinet and Advisory War Council. He had told them he agreed with Generals Rowell and Allen and their forward commanders and staffs that the Japanese 'would not be able to take Port Moresby from the land'.

'MacArthur, brilliant but egocentric, was determined that *no* Australian have more than the absolute minimum of wartime limelight' (Hetherington). So this situation played right into MacArthur's hands to denude Australians, in the person of Blamey, of any real powers.

Hetherington: 'It was the first positive step in downgrading of Australia to the status of a very minor partner, and the Government failed to see what was happening'. 'It is not a C-in-C's function except in a dire crisis (and no such existed in New Guinea in September 1942) to direct the combat troops; his duty is to see that his tactical commanders have the means to win battles and to interfere only if they show themselves incompetent'.

Blamey expected Rowell to be resistant and spent some time preparing an advance letter in disarming terms to Rowell to explain why he had to come. He undertook to bring only his Personal Assistant, two cipher officers and his personal clerk and reaffirmed his support. It would be a tricky situation – two senior commanders operating from the one HQ. But Rowell was openly hostile. As Hetherington reports, both were proud men, uncommonly resolute, who found themselves in a difficult situation not of their own making. 'The crucial fact is that Rowell could not bring himself to accept the orders of his superior officer'. 'Had Curtin and his ministers foreseen what they were doing they could have averted a rupture which cut deep scars on the minds and reputations of two central figures and created two distinct camps within the army'. Rowell

was replaced by Lieutenant General Herring as Commander New Guinea Force.

Hetherington: 'The campaign which wrested Papua from the Japanese was as punishing as any ever fought by Australian soldiers. It ended when Sanaanda fell in January 1943 but the struggle took a heavy toll of the nerves and bodies of the men who won it. It called for the highest qualities of fortitude, courage and military skill. In Blamey's words: 'The chief reason for our success in this campaign was that our ground troops proved to be better led, better equipped and better trained than those of the enemy and were, man for man, better fighters'.

Hetherington: 'A month after Blamey's arrival at Moresby, Brigadier Potts, whose 21st Brigade had played what is now known to be a gallant and resolute part in holding and turning the Japanese thrust through the Owen Stanleys, was relieved of his command. Once all the facts became known it was clear Potts was penalised for reversals not of his fault but this was by no means obvious in the heat of operations'.

A fortnight later Blamey addressed the 21st Brigade in a parade at Koitaki. He spoke to the whole Brigade first and then to their officers in the Officers Mess. There are conflicting accounts of what came to be a black mark on the General's reputation.

According to Hetherington: 'Nobody can swear to what he said because nobody made a record of it at the time but it engendered savage indignation'. The words which left a lasting scar were to the effect that "it's not the man with the gun that gets shot but the rabbit that's running away". Most of the hearers took this to mean that the Brigade had acted like rabbits and run from the enemy; they never forgot it. Some believe that *was* what was said and was ill-chosen and unfair, others that Blamey needed to steel the men for what he knew would be a desperate fight to stop the Japanese. Probably there was little understanding then of the initial strength, training and experience of the enemy. To the officers he began with "I wonder if you are worthy of commanding such magnificent troops". Captain Porter, Blamey's ADC, recalled that in the staff car later, "General Blamey was strangely quiet, on the point of weeping".

Brigadier Dougherty who had taken over from Potts understood Blamey's words quite differently to most; he did not dream that anybody could take offence at them. "Blamey talked about the Japanese", Dougherty said later. "Listening to him I thought it was quite a good description of the tactics to deal with the Japanese. The men were in a hypersensitive state as a result of newspaper criticisms".

As the 7th Division's Kokoda advance under Major-General Allen progressed despite supply problems and exceptionally difficult mountain terrain, Blamey had brought Major-General George Vasey up to New Guinea to relieve Allen if the latter should need a

break, and then to rotate them again, leaving it to Allen to make the call.

Blamey was apparently satisfied that Allen was handling a tough situation well. But MacArthur was not. He insisted 'press General Allen's advance. It is essential Kokoda airfield be taken'. Blamey wrote to MacArthur with a plea for understanding Allen's situation, despite his force's slow progress. The Supreme Commander radioed Blamey showing no patience or sympathy and little understanding, including 'Please give your personal attention to the accomplishment of this purpose (securing Kokoda airfield) adequate means for which are available and present'. Separately, Allen was 'singularly hurt' by MacArthur's message.

Blamey asked Herring how he would feel about sending Vasey forward and bringing Allen out for a spell. Herring agreed. Allen had set his heart on retaking Kokoda and indeed pressure on the enemy was on the point of tipping the scale. Within five days the Australians re-entered Kokoda. The advance from Ioribawa to Kokoda had taken 35 days, 16 fewer than the Japanese had needed'.

Given Blamey's enormous experience over two wars, it is probable he felt a "fighting withdrawal" was the best strategy: allow the enemy to slowly extend themselves and their supply lines across the rugged ranges to the point where their advance was no longer sustainable, reconnaissance deficient, no communications, their troops exhausted and undernourished - and so forced to withdraw, at the same time conserving his own troops. But this would have been in contravention of MacArthur's orders and the latter's unfamiliarity of, or unwillingness to accept, the true situation there.

Hetherington: 'Blamey performed an astonishing feat in the Papuan campaign. As Commander, Allied Land Forces, he directed operations in the field while simultaneously handling a heavy and incessant flow of matters as C-in-C, Australian Military Forces. His mastery of detail and his capacity for swift analysis were uncanny; he could skim through a long paper on an intricate subject and then crystallise the essentials into two or three sentences. He used this phenomenal memory to the full in Papua and would have been lost without it'.

Hetherington: 'Although he had arrived in Port Moresby to find the first phase of the campaign well under way on the basis of General Rowell's planning, Blamey had been the chief architect of the later successes, notably of the arduous operations on the coastal plain. MacArthur above him, and Herring, below him had each made a valuable contribution but Blamey's had been the guiding hand and guiding brain. He had been patient, dogged, far-seeing, imaginative, tireless. When things went wrong he cut his losses and tried again; when they went right he built on his successes'.

There was a second enemy in New Guinea – the malarial mosquito. Advised by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Ford, an expert in tropical medicine, Blamey acted. A new priority was fixed for malaria control. The weekly incidence of malaria in the Milne Bay area fell within a few months from 82 cases per 1000 men to 5.

Blamey was well-known to distrust the press and insisted on restrictions in operational areas. Carlyon believed Blamey's achievements were never fully appreciated because of Blamey's - and, Director General Army Public Relations, Colonel Rasmussen's - poor use of public relations. This is in marked contrast to MacArthur's cultivation of personal fame. Blamey was known to remark "I do not care much what others think".

In Blamey's place most commanders would have remained for the last triumphal act but as soon as the back of the Sanananda defences was broken and the enemy on the point of collapse there, he handed over his command to Herring and returned to pressing policy matters in Australia.

While still C-in-C, looking far beyond the war and concerned to 'put a stop to the drainage of outstanding young Australians to posts in other countries', Tom was a champion of the founding of the Australian National University and instrumental in securing the Adelaide-born Oxford Professor Howard Florey to come back to Australia to establish a medical research institute.

The atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August 1945. Japan surrendered by the 15th. Blamey represented and signed for Australia when MacArthur took the surrender at Tokyo Bay on board *USS Missouri* on September 2nd. Blamey himself took the surrender of the commander of II Japanese Army at Morotai a week later.

Sir Thomas Blamey by the end of the war had an exceptional raft of awards and honours: GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, ED.

He wrote to Minister Forde saying he was 'desirous of laying down my office as soon as possible'. The Government told him they wanted him to supervise demobilisation. Then without warning, in November, after six years as our nation's most senior army commander, Forde gave him a fortnight to pack up and go. (Forde refused the list of awards Blamey had studiously prepared for Australia's senior officers 'who had borne the weight of the war for six years').

After the war General Douglas MacArthur, not one to freely hand out praise to Australian Commanders, said of Blamey:

"I have always felt that his services in the Second World War were not sufficiently recognised. 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 owe him a debt of gratitude".



Photo provided by the author; from Australian War Memorial archive: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/150818>

When Menzies returned as Prime Minister in December 1949 he re-posted Tom Blamey to the Active List so that he could be named Field Marshal. Congratulations poured in from all over the world. 'He had only a few days to savour the crowning triumph of his military career before he fell ill'.

At Heidelberg Repatriation hospital I was there when Governor-General Sir William McKell presented him with the Field Marshal's Baton. Tom had not the strength to deliver the speech he intended: It included:

"I want the survivors and families of those who fell to know that I, who knew better than most what our soldiers did, have frequently been moved beyond words by what I have had to ask of them and by the manner in which they invariably responded....."

The baton that has come to me is a richer reward than any soldier could have hoped for. It symbolises authority and responsibility on the highest plane. I receive it in a spirit of humility and as a trustee for all the unnamed comrades whose loyalty, courage and faithful service were responsible for its being conferred on me."

Tom's words went on: "Our nation's future is, unfortunately, not yet secured - its sons must consent to accept whatever responsibilities fall on them and draw strength for their discharge from the traditions of their predecessors.

I can no longer lead them but I commend those familiar Army words in which was so often combined all that was best of exhortation and encouragement: "Carry On".

The Baton was kept in his dressing table drawer there until he died in May 1951, just 67 years old.

Epilogue

What was Thomas Blamey's job in World War II? Essentially I see he had four critical, almost impossible, tasks:

- to create an army, recruit, equip, train and lead a force of half a million soldiers;
- to ensure Australia's forces made a huge impact on the allied campaigns in the Middle East;
- to work with the Americans to save Australia and defeat the Japanese in the South-West Pacific;
- and to do all the above with minimal losses.

He succeeded. It is questionable whether anyone else could have.

So why is his name all but forgotten today, not taught in schools, hardly commemorated in public institutions? Even why have his memorabilia and fine portraits by famous artists lain buried for years until 2020 in the vaults of The Australian War Memorial?

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 controversies? 'Pop' historians, lacking thorough or original research, have been swayed by the published views of two people who had an undying grudge against Blamey – Sir Sydney Rowell and Chester Wilmot. They have stressed his shortcomings but ignored Blamey's extraordinary achievements in both 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 *and* his pivotal role in saving our nation from occupation.

It is sad that Australia's great soldier has been so treated. But, in my view, it goes much deeper than that. It denigrates the hundreds of thousands who loyally 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 view were 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 Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance on May 30, 1951 where Blamey lay in state? Would 10 Generals and 4 thousand troops have escorted the gun-carriage which bore him? Would 300 thousand people have lined Melbourne's streets from the Shrine through the city in respectful, tearful silence?

Menzies, who in 1962 had unveiled the Blamey statue in Melbourne's Domain, opposite Monash's, said ten years later:

"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...."

"In the twenty years since his death 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 candour. Blamey has come through it larger of stature than ever”.

But that was half a century ago. Sadly, outside of the military, that conclusion is less apparent today.

Major-General Cooke, in 1984: ‘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.

Thank you for patiently following me through my Grandfather’s remarkable - and vital - contributions to our heritage.

And sincere thanks to the Royal United Services Institute for offering me the privilege of addressing you today.

The Author

Ted Blamey graduated with honours in Applied Science from the University of Melbourne and from Harvard with an MBA. A former McKinsey & Co. consultant, he led prominent cruise lines in both hemispheres, first as Managing Director Australasia, then in Los Angeles as worldwide President/CEO. Ted then served as CEO of Australia’s largest retail travel group, Chairman of Sydney Ports and was instrumental in the start-up of a global luxury cruise line. Founding CHART Management Consultants he has since provided strategic advice to cruise industry leaders worldwide for over 25 years.

