

Field Marshal Sir Thomas Albert Blamey

by **Nicholas Han**



INTRODUCTION

A man who attracted controversy but retained the confidence of prime ministers, Sir Thomas Albert Blamey was the first Australian army officer to attain the rank of Field Marshal. While upholding the interests of Australia and developing the Australian Army for vital battles in the Pacific, he also brought about many inventions and innovations into the military and the police force.

EARLY LIFE

Sir Thomas Albert Blamey was born on 24 January 1884 at Lake Albert, near Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.¹ He was the seventh child of Richard Blamey, a butcher who emigrated to Australia at age 16 and took jobs such as a contract drover and an overseer of shearing sheds.² Passing the New South Wales Education Department's entrance examination at the age of 15, Tom worked as a pupil-teacher at Lake Albert School, transferred to South Wagga Public in 1901, and moved to Western Australia in 1903 to be a teaching assistant at Fremantle Boy's School for three years.³

MILITARY CAREER

In 1906 he was offered an appointment as an probationary

minister in Carnarvon but, before he accepted, he saw an advertisement promoting applications for commissions in the Commonwealth Cadet Forces.⁴ Blamey was placed third in a national military examination, appointed lieutenant on the Administrative and Instructional Staff in November, and posted to Melbourne.⁵ On 8 September 1909, he married Minnie Millard in Melbourne and had two children over the span of five years.⁶ In 1910, Blamey was transferred to the Australian Military Forces and promoted to captain, taking over the brigade major of the 12th Brigade Area.⁷ Following a competitive optional entrance examination for the Staff College, Quetta, India in 1912, he became the first Australian officer to pass, indicating his determination to make a success out of his career. In his report the commandant mentioned that Blamey came here without military knowledge. However, his work during the first year was characterized by a very genuine determination to overcome this shortcoming, succeeding beyond all expectations by the end of that year.⁸ While in India, he also spent some time on attachment to the British and Indian Armies, namely 4th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps at Rawalpindi, Kohat

Brigade on the North West Frontier, Shimal Army Headquarters and 4th Dragoon Guards at Tidworth.⁹ Blamey was promoted to major on 1 July 1914.¹⁰

WORLD WAR I

On the outbreak of World War I, Major Blamey was transferred briefly to the War Office in London before joining the 1st Australian Division in Egypt as General Staff Officer (GSO), Grade 3 (Intelligence). He landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, sent to evaluate the situation on the 400 Plateau and sent reinforcements.¹¹ On 13 May 1915, when Blamey led a patrol behind the Turkish lines, an enemy party of eight Turks appeared, one attacking Bombardier A. A. Orchard with a bayonet. Blamey shot him with his revolver, and six Turks were killed thereafter. He withdrew his men back safely to the Australian lines, and for that incident he was mentioned in dispatches.¹² He was always curious in technical innovation, realizing the adoption of the periscope rifles in Australian trenches, first seeing it at the front line at Gallipoli.¹³ In July he was promoted to temporary lieutenant colonel and went back to Egypt to aid the creation of the 2nd Australian Division.¹⁴

On the Western Front in 1916, Blamey was made the Chief of Staff and served as GSO1 in the 1st Division.¹⁵ He was also promoted to full colonel by Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood in

1 December 1916. In the 1917 New Year Honors, he received the Distinguished Service Order award for developing the successful attack plan for the Battle of Pozieres, and also received a mention in dispatches in the process.¹⁶ In end 1916, Blamey commanded the 2nd Infantry Battalion, and thereafter became acting commander of the 1st Infantry Brigade. When General Headquarters realized that Blamey was a staff college graduate, they commented that "it is inadvisable to release such officers for command of battalions unless they have proved to be unequal to their duties on staff."¹⁷

In June 1918, Blamey was promoted to brigadier general as the Australian Corps Brigadier General, General Staff (BGGs), and thereafter aided the success of the Battle of Hamel by pressing for new tank models to be used.¹⁸ He also took note of the use of mustard gas used by the Germans, and went out of the way to arrange for a supply of mustard gas shells for the assault on the Hindenburg Line.¹⁹ Lieutenant General John Monash, commander of the Australian Corps then, mentioned that Blamey "possessed a mind cultured far above the average, widely informed, alert and prehensile."²⁰ For his efforts in the Australian Corps, Blamey was appointed Companion of the Order of the Bath in 1919, awarded the French *Croix de Guerre* and also mentioned twice more in dispatches.²¹

INTER-WAR YEARS

Blamey became director of Military Operations at Army Headquarters in Melbourne in October 1919, while retaining his wartime rank of brigadier general as an honorary rank. In 1920 he was promoted to substantive colonel and appointed Deputy Chief of the General Staff.²² Blamey was one of the two Army representatives that aided in the creation of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) when the government set up a joint Army-Navy board for opinions.²³ In 1922, Blamey was involved in the establishing of the Singapore strategy (a naval defense policy which involved basing a fleet of the Royal Navy in the Far East), and although skeptical, he briefed Prime Minister Stanley Bruce on the strategy for the 1923 Imperial Conference.²⁴ In 1923, Lieutenant Colonel Brudenell White retired as Chief of General Staff (CGS), passing the role to Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel, while Blamey was assigned the new post of Second Chief of General Staff, the duties of which were the same as CGS.²⁵ He transferred from the Permanent Military Forces to the Militia on 1 September 1925, assumed command of the 10th Infantry Brigade, then afterward the 3rd Division on 23 March 1931. He was promoted to major general, one of four in that decade.²⁶

After the resignation of the Victoria Police Chief Commissioner, Alexander Nicholson, Blamey was recommended and received that position on 1 September 1925 for five years. He was determined

to attend to the issues that led to the 1923 Victoria Police strike, which he felt were “just, even if they went the wrong way about them.”²⁷ He raised pay and improved conditions, and applied the recommendations of the Royal Commission into the strike.²⁸ Other significant implementations were introducing police dogs, increasing police cars equipped with two-way radios and boosting the number of policewomen in the force.²⁹ He tried to call for faster promotion by merit, however it was withdrawn later as the Police Association did not favor it.³⁰

A scandal occurred in 21 October 1925, where a raid in a brothel in Fitzroy found a man who was carrying Blamey’s police badge. Blamey’s reason for this was that he gave his key ring which included it to his friend who worked with him in France, giving him access to alcohol in his locker in the Naval and Military Club. His story was backed up by then-Captain Stanley Savige who was with him at the time. Blamey did not want to reveal the man as he was married with children.³¹

It has been said that, while being Chief Commissioner, Blamey was in charge of the “White Army,” a right-wing, underground army prepared to defend the state if there were any communist or Catholic attempts to overrule the state. Although Blamey’s position in this could not be determined, he was trained and was naturally an autocrat; he thought himself to be the supreme

commander of the police force and worked accordingly. The police force’s official historian noted that “Blamey’s style of dealing with public protest was confrontationalist, readily violent, and generally ruthless.” On Argyle’s United Australia Party government’s recommendation, he was knighted in 1935, but on 9 July 1936, Sir Albert Dunstan’s Country Party administration forced him to resign for issuing an untrue statement in an attempt to protect the reputation of one of his senior police officers.³² Blamey was later recommended by Richard Casey and Jo Gullet to be a possible commander in chief in the event of a war, and in April 1939 was designated so by Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, who was replaced soon later by Robert Menzies, a fellow supporter of Blamey.³³

WORLD WAR II

After the start of World War II in September 1939, Blamey was promoted to lieutenant general and commanded the 6th Division, receiving the Australian Imperial Force service number VXI.³⁴ Almost all brigade commanders and 6th division commanders chosen by Blamey had served with him in 3rd Division in Melbourne. A year later, the 7th Division was formed and grouped together with the 6th Division called I Corps, with Blamey as its commander.³⁵ He was directly answerable to the Minister of Defense, instead of the Military Board, and was given a charter in 1914 that required him to keep his forces together and

to seek consent of the Australian government if he wanted to send them out.³⁶ However, he did not follow this and allowed Australian units to be deployed for the Middle East crises according to military need.³⁷ After the crises ended, Blamey requested his units to return, causing conflicts with British commanders in the process.

I Corps was tasked to Cyrenaica on 15 February 1941. Blamey insisted 6th Division to be sent before the 7th, causing a large debate with British Commander in Chief Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell.³⁸ Winning the argument, he set about plans for evacuation immediately as he noticed the chances of success was not high. Blamey managed to save many men but lost credibility when he let his son take the last seat out of Greece.³⁹ Wavell reported that Blamey “has shown himself a fine fighting commander in these operations and fitted for high command.”⁴⁰

Blamey was appointed Deputy Commander in Chief Middle East in April 1941, and promoted to general in 24 September 1941.⁴¹ During the Syrian campaign against the Vichy French, Blamey tried to resolve the command problems caused by General Wilson’s attempt to direct the fighting from the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by interposing Lavarack’s I Corps headquarters. For all his efforts in the Middle East, Blamey was made a Knight Commander of the

Order of the Bath on 1 January 1942, mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Greek War Cross, First Class.⁴²

AFTER WORLD WAR II

Blamey offered to resign his post of Commander in Chief on 15 September 1945, formally retiring 31 January 1946.⁴³ The Minister of Army Frank Forde wanted to reward Blamey for his services. Blamey wanted knighthoods for his generals but that could not be arranged. Instead, Forde gave Blamey the Buick car he had used during the war.⁴⁴ Blamey was duly promoted to field marshal in the King's Birthday Honors of 8 June 1950. He passed away due to cerebral hemorrhage on 27 May 1951.⁴⁵

Blamey is honored in Australia in many ways, such as a square named after him in Canberra, a street and park named after him in New South Wales, and a statue of him in Kings Domain, Melbourne.⁴⁶ The statue reflected Blamey on a jeep instead of a horse, showing his role in the technological transformation of the Army during his years of service. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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