

# ANZAC SERVICE OF COMMEMORATION ADDRESS 2024 MELBOURNE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

BY TED BLAMEY (OM 1962/63)

## ***Australian Generalship Through Two World Wars***

*Gallipoli > Western Front > Australia > Middle East > Papua New Guinea > Australia*

### **The Old Melburnians War Memorial Hall, 26 April**

Dawn, April 25, 1915.

*Our officer briefed us for landing. We were scared stiff but keyed up and eager to be on our way. We thought we would tear through the Turks. Suddenly all hell broke loose; heavy shelling and shrapnel fire. Bullets were thumping into us in the rowing boat. Men were being hit and killed all around me.*

*When cut loose to make our way to the shore was the worst. I was terribly frightened. The boat touched bottom so we had to jump out and wade. The water in some places was up to my shoulders. The Turks' machine guns swept the beach. Bodies of men were everywhere, wounded were screaming for help, the Turkish fire was terrible and mowing into us. It worried me for days that I couldn't stop to help the men calling out.*

(Private Albert Facey).

Yet the Australians continued to come ashore.

Landing with General William Bridges, commander of the 1st Australian Imperial Force, was 31-year-old Intelligence Officer, Major Thomas Albert Blamey.

His were the most humble of beginnings, raised in regional NSW, one of ten children to a contract drover who had sailed at age 16 from Cornwall. Tom left the rural high school at 18 to become a teacher.

But at 30, he was the first Australian to win a place to the Imperial Staff College with future leaders of the British army. He impressed - one who never spared himself, his down-to-earth Aussie style, focus on the task, ironclad efficiency and brilliance of mind for matters military.

So why were we at Gallipoli? To mount a supposedly surprise attack on Germany's allies, the Ottoman Turks. Nigh impossible - we had no advantage. Over the next eight months, Australia lost 8,700 lives with another 18,000 wounded, New Zealand 3,400 killed, and 4,200 wounded. The enemy 7,000 killed, 97,000 wounded.

Blamey, a staff officer, also proved his mettle in the trenches, helped negotiate a temporary truce for a mass burial, and had an ingenious periscope rifle adopted. And learned the consequences of Australian formations being deployed at the whim of the British commanders.

Their most successful operation was the evacuation from Anzac Cove, under a well-planned deception. But this failed campaign brought out extraordinary bravery, mateship and resourcefulness for which the ANZACs became famous.

They headed for France and Belgium in March 1916.

Blamey served in the Somme offensive (quote) *'a searching test of his capacity and he came through it with flying colours'*. By June 1918, he had risen to be Australia's youngest-ever General officer, selected by corps commander Lieutenant General John Monash as his Brigadier General Staff. Tom was 33.

Blamey, the planner and Monash, the strategist, designed and executed famous victories on the Western front, the battles of Hamel and Amiens, that turned the tide decisively to the Allies and, it is widely accepted, shortened the war by 12 months. German General Ludendorff's memoirs recorded Hamel as *'the black day of the German Army'*.

Said Monash: *"Someday the orders T. A. Blamey drafted for the long series of history-making military operations upon which we collaborated will become a model for military instruction"*. And so they did.

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After the first war, Tom chaired the committee that established the Royal Australian Air Force.

Meanwhile, he sent both his sons to Melbourne Grammar School.

The eldest, Charles, went on to Royal Military College Duntroon, won the King's Medal as the top student, then joined that very RAAF as a Pilot Officer. With huge sadness, Tom learned Charles had been killed while serving. He was only 22.

Younger son, Thomas Raymond, was an MGS swimming and rifle champion, studied law, served in World War II, finished as Lieutenant Colonel with an MBE, and then significantly influenced Australia's mining industry. Grammar's Blamey Award for swimming is in his memory.

Tom Senior served as Victoria's Chief of Police for 11 years. Resigning under pressure in 1936 he fell on hard times. He made few friends broadcasting about the threat posed by the Japanese Empire and the inevitability of a Pacific war, to prod Australians and our Government out of lethargy.

He was right. Soon war again descended – eventually to threaten our very shores.

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Australia declared war on Germany in September 1939. TAB, then 55, was recalled to the Army, charged with forming the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF, and promoted Lieutenant-General.

*'An Australian to his innermost being and a proud one, he took steps to ensure his Charter from the Government was watertight, to reserve the right of veto on the use of our forces. He used it throughout this war to protect the ordinary soldier from rough usage by foreign commanders.*

He chose carefully his senior staff. Distinguished Melbourne Grammar names included Edmund Herring and Samuel Burston. Blamey told his generals: "I've chosen you because I think you will look after the troops".

In February 1940 the Australians arrived in Palestine to take up the fight against the Italians and Germans with Tom as General Officer Commanding AIF Middle East. British General Wavell reported: *'Probably the best soldier we had in the Middle East. Not an easy man to deal with but ... his military knowledge was unexampled, and he was positive, firm and a very satisfactory commander'*.

In December 1941 the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. They attacked Thailand, the Philippines, and Hong Kong and landed in northern Malaya.

Singapore fell in February 1942. The only Australian Division not under Blamey's command saw 15,000 thousand taken into 3 years of agonising captivity. Many were never to return.

Blamey and his army returned from the Middle East to defend our nation.

Prime Minister Curtin appointed Tom as Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces as a full General. (Quote) *'A command far larger and far more complex than Monash's in the first war awaited him. For three years it was to demand all his energies of mind and body ... he was more or less constantly under political and sectional attack.'*

The Japanese landed in strength in Papua New Guinea in July 1942, intending to take Port Moresby from the north by September, 160 kilometres over the rugged Owen Stanley range. Kokoda Village was their first target. Outnumbered by a more experienced and better-armed enemy the Australians lost Kokoda to the Japanese mid-August. But in November, despite impossible terrain and weather, shortage of supplies, lack of clothing or cover, Kokoda was retaken.

The second Japanese assault was from Milne Bay in the east. In fierce and desperate fighting the Australian defenders held on and in the end smashed the attack. It was Japan's first defeat on land.

The Aussies finally wrested Papua from the Imperial Japanese Army in January 1943 –a campaign “ as punishing as any ever fought by Australian soldiers - a heavy toll on the nerves and bodies of the men who won it. It called for the highest qualities of fortitude, courage and military skill.”

The PNG campaign cost 127,700 Japanese and 5,770 Australian lives. But Port Moresby (and Australia, just over 500 km away), were safe.

In Blamey's words: *'The chief reason for our success was that our ground troops proved to be better led than those of the enemy and were, man for man, better fighters'*.

While still Commander-in-Chief, looking far beyond the war and concerned to *'put a stop to the drainage of outstanding young Australians overseas'*, Tom championed founding the Australian National University and secured Oxford Professor Florey to establish a medical research institute.

The atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Blamey signed for Australia when America's General Douglas MacArthur took Japan's surrender at Tokyo Bay. Tom himself took the surrender of the Japanese Army at Morotai.

MacArthur said of Blamey

*"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 owe him a debt of gratitude."*

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In 1949 our Government honoured Tom Blamey with the army's highest rank. Congratulations poured in from all over the world. Australia's first and only Field Marshal 'had only a few days to savour the crowning triumph of his military career before he fell ill.'

In May 1951 20,000 people filed through Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance where the now dead Blamey lay in state. 10 Generals and 4 thousand troops escorted the gun-carriage which bore him. 300 thousand people lined Melbourne's streets in sorrowful silence.

Prime Minister Menzies, who had unveiled the Blamey statue in Melbourne's Domain, opposite Monash's, later wrote:

*"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 ... secure*

Major-General Cooke declared: *'In T A Blamey we have the embodiment of the real Australian character .... he forms an important part of our history ... (we must) ensure his story is not forgotten but passed on to future generations'.....*

.... my purpose and my privilege today.

In September 1950, Governor-General McKell presented the Field Marshal's Baton at Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital.

Tom had not the strength to deliver his acceptance speech: It began:

*"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.....*

And it concluded:

*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".*

I was there. I was five. Thomas Albert was my grandfather. Thomas Raymond, my father, sent me and my brother Terry to Melbourne Grammar. I have sat where you now sit at this solemn ceremony of remembrance. My 13 years here was the making of me – not just the exceptional classroom experiences but, importantly, countless opportunities for leadership and service, building resourcefulness, resilience - and friendships.

Perhaps Field Marshall Sir Thomas Blamey's story, Australia's most decorated commander, the drover's seventh child from Wagga Wagga, will inspire you too, no matter how humble *your* beginnings - *to use* (as our school prayer entreats) *the talents committed to your charge to the welfare of your fellow-creatures* - - so to bring determination, resourcefulness, humility, strength in leadership, courage and loyalty to serve your mates, this fine school and your nation - in your own way, in your own time .

"Carry On"!

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Thomas Edward Blamey, April 2024

Primary additional source material from John Hetherington's biography: *Blamey, Controversial Soldier*, Australian War Memorial & Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra 1973