

Field Marshal Sir Thomas Albert Blamey: A Career of Challenges, Conquests, and Controversies: (Part I¹)

A paper based on the presentation to the Institute on 30 January 2024 by
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The author Thomas Blamey, 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.

It is a distinct privilege to be invited to address this august body – but it is also somewhat daunting. For I am a global CEO and strategy consultant, not a historian, nor an expert on military affairs, nor have I the life-changing experience of serving my country in armed conflict. Nor had I the honour of wearing the Australian emblem proudly as I go to work.

“Why then”, I hear you ask, “are you here?” Perhaps I have one possible qualification to speak on our nation's wartime Commander ... I met him. Hardly surprising given he was my grandfather.

I was young, not quite six years old, my brother Terry just one, when our grandfather died. With great fondness I remember our times together with Olga, Lady Blamey, at their home in South Yarra and later, our frequent visits to his bedside at Heidelberg Repat Hospital in Ivanhoe, Victoria. I remember a loving, jolly but slightly awesome, largish gentleman.

The four biographies written about Blamey are familiar to me. Also, I have also reviewed the work of several other writers on World Wars I and II as they relate to our topic. One of them, John Hetherington's second biography and extensive research in *BLAMEY Controversial Soldier* (1973) will find repeated reference in this address. I thought it also important to quote what contemporaries said about Blamey who was so influential in the structure and functioning of the modern army and in Australia's successes in two world wars.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Blamey did not pen and publish his autobiography. A publisher had offered him a handsome price for his Second World War memoirs and he had intended writing two books, *Middle East Background* and *Pacific Background*, but the books were never finished. “Too many reputations would have to be hurt” he remarked.

My address today is an attempt to offer balance and insight into the life and service of Blamey, an exceptional Australian, while not ignoring controversies, especially in recent decades that have surrounded our youngest – and, later, oldest General Officer, our only Field Marshal. The address is offered as a study of the man – a man not given his due - rather than a treatise on defence and security matters.

Nevertheless, this address *may* advance discussion on Australia's defence and security thinking – how, I leave you to judge. Hopefully there *are* lessons here on leadership, on resilience and loyalty, on balancing the concurrent and often conflicting roles of commander and subordinate, on the tricky relationships between Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) and the press and with his political masters - and on innovation and battlefield strategy.

In summary, Thomas Albert Blamey served his nation loyally, with distinction, through two world wars; bore enormous responsibility, workload and stress with equanimity; was loved and hated in equal measure; was Australia's most decorated commander yet shunned by our post-war Labor government; eschewed personal publicity, intent on the task, the immense challenges that he willingly accepted; made enemies at home while confounding those enemies with whom we were at war. He had an exceptional mind, especially for matters military, was a shrewd judge of character, a rare commander and leader, blunt, decisive and brilliant. He could be tactless. He frequently put the press offside.

Prime Minister Menzies had stated: “None matched him in power of command, a quality hard to define but impossible to mistake when you meet it”. Labor's Arthur Calwell said: “The next man to Blamey is like a curate to a bishop”.

Like others bearing the burdens of command, Blamey made mistakes - in the Kokoda campaign in particular. It is these that the ‘pop’ historians repeatedly trot out - to the exclusion of his manifold achievements. Sadly, in Australia's tall-poppy world,

¹Part II will be published in the *United Service*, Volume 75 Number 2, June 2024.

their views increasingly became how Blamey is known, if known at all. But is that a fair, accurate, view of his legacy?

I suppose a chronological narrative will serve us best to canvass that question.

Childhood to World War I

Thomas Albert Blamey was born at Lake Albert, near Wagga Wagga, New South Wales (NSW) in 1884, the seventh of ten children. His father, Richard Henwood Blamey, when 16 years old had emigrated from Cornwall, England, worked as a drover and in other tough jobs in the bush until marrying Margaret Murray and setting up modest, unsuccessful farms - first in

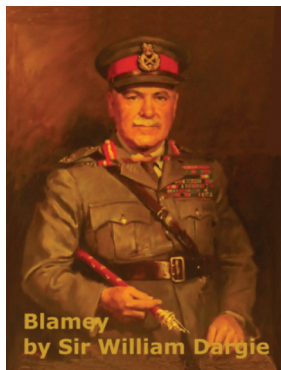


Photo provided by the Author.

Charleville, Queensland, then forced out by drought in Wagga. Blamey's beginnings were modest indeed.

Young Blamey loved horses and understood them. Hetherington: 'He learned early to stand without anyone else's help on the broad feet which were to carry him through his successful but often tempestuous life'. At 15 he and his brother Jim, 18, attempted to volunteer for the NSW contingent to the Boer War, but told to "go home and grow up".

He began as a pupil-teacher at Wagga Public where he also led a small but disciplined cadet unit. He loved teaching and, to advance, in 1903 secured a posting with the Western Australia Education Department where he also plunged with enthusiasm into the cadet movement. He taught at Fremantle Boys School for more than three years.

A teetotaler and non-smoker, Blamey had considered becoming a Methodist minister (and indeed preached at Fremantle churches and played the organ in later years for church services). That all changed when he saw an advertisement for an examination to select young men for commissions in the Australian Military. With little time to prepare he flung himself into the work in the three weeks remaining before the examination. He was placed third among candidates from the whole of Australia.

In 1906, aged 22, he moved to Melbourne, commissioned First Lieutenant in the regular army, itself only five years old. He married Minnie Millard in 1909. Their first son, Charles (Dolf) was born in 1910 (sadly killed when in the Air Force in 1932), the second, Thomas Raymond ('Young Tom', my father, later Lieutenant-Colonel) born four years later.

At 27 years Captain Blamey sat for the challenging entrance examination for the Imperial Staff College located in Quetta, India (now in Pakistan). He came

first, winning the entry, rather than by privilege. He distinguished himself at the College over the two years, both in military acumen and physical prowess (an excellent horseman) winning the admiration of fellow students, some of whom became colleagues when they held senior posts in the British Army.

When World War I (WWI) broke out, Blamey was serving as a Major with the Australian Army at the War Office in London, reporting to General Bridges. Not yet 31, going first to Mena, outside Cairo, he landed at Gallipoli on what became 'Anzac Day' on 25 April 1915 as General Staff Officer Grade III (GSO III). Over the ensuing months he learned the consequences of Australian formations being subservient to the British.

Action on the Western Front followed. He reached France with the 2nd Australian Division in the spring of 1916 and became GSO 1 of the 1st Australian Division in July. Hetherington: 'Its first assignment was the Somme offensive where the impact of Blamey's mind is clearly stamped on the planning of its operations, including the capture of Pozieres'. Seeking a battlefield command, Blamey was given the 2nd battalion and three weeks later temporarily command of the 1st Infantry Brigade.

But known as so able a Staff Officer, he was recalled when Major-General Sir John Monash was appointed Australia's Corps Commander, selecting Blamey as his Brigadier General Staff. He was then aged just 34.

Together they devised a wholly innovative battle strategy – deploying troops, tanks, artillery and aircraft in concert. This was to prove decisive. Their battle plans for the famous allied victories at Hamel and Amiens ensured a swift result and were remarkable for their low casualty rates. Their approach turned the tide decisively in the Allies' favour and, it is widely accepted, foreshortened the war by 12 months.

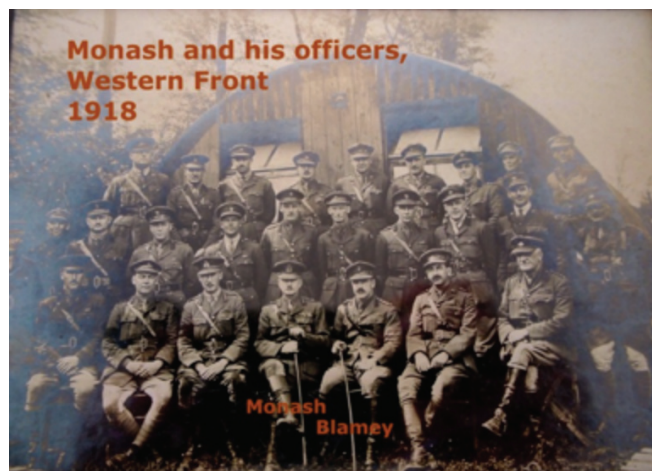


Photo provided by the Author.

Monash, with the benefit of long hours working with Blamey, summed up his character this way:

'.. my Chief of Staff possessed a mind cultured far above the average, widely informed, alert and prehensile. He had an infinite capacity for taking pains. A staff college graduate but not on that account a pedant, he was thoroughly versed in the technique of staff work and in the minutiae of all procedure.

He served me with exemplary loyalty, for which I owe him a debt of gratitude that cannot be repaid. He had an extraordinary facility of self-effacement. Really helpful whenever his advice was invited, he never obtruded his own opinions, although I knew he did not always agree with me.

Someday the orders he drafted for the long series of history-making military operations upon which we collaborated will become a model for Staff Colleges and Schools for military instruction. They were accurate, lucid in language, perfect in detail, and always an exact interpretation of my intention. ... and no commander could have been more exacting than I was...

Monash continued: *Blamey was a man of inexhaustible industry and accepted every task with placid readiness. Nothing was ever too much trouble. He worked late and early and set a high standard for the large Corps Staff of which he was the head. I was able to lean on him in times of trouble, stress and difficulty, to a degree which was an inexpressible comfort to me'.*

(We might observe this is not the view promulgated by some more recent writers, relying on second-hand, and sometimes self-serving, narratives).

Brigadier Blamey returned to Australia late in 1919 resplendent with honours, the CB², CMG³, DSO⁴ and the French Croix de Guerre⁵, and mentioned in dispatches seven times. Hetherington: 'His friends found a graver man than the young officer who had gone off to India eight years before bent on conquering the world. He was aged beyond his years – sadder but wiser. He never discussed the war or what it had done to him'.

Post World War I

After WWI, Blamey chaired the committee that established the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), refereeing between the two existing services and intervening to secure agreement. He actively supported efforts to care for widows of the those who had given all for the empire.

He served as Director of Military Operations at Army HQ, Melbourne, then Deputy Chief of General Staff (CGS), then was sent to London as Australian representative on the Imperial General Staff. Late in 1923, the post of Second CGS was added to his appointments. He had good reason to feel that his future lay in the army and nowhere else.

However, being just 41, with many able career officers now senior to him, Blamey realised that his army career prospects were limited in peacetime, with the government withdrawing funding and enlisted numbers severely reduced. Following the Victorian police mutiny of 1923, a Royal Commission and the eventual resignation of the Chief Commissioner, the state government sought an outside appointment. Blamey's name was put forward by Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel, then CGS, as an excellent organiser, a superb disciplinarian, a skilled manager of men. He agreed to take the role of Chief Commissioner of Police in Victoria, leaving the army that he loved.

It was a turbulent time in Victoria during which the State Government required him to counter crime gangs, control labour unrest, maintain order during the depression (at its peak in 1932). Politico-military organisations in Australia modelled on the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists were born there in the 1930s.

Blamey set about addressing the force's grievances, improving niggardly police pay, equipment, skills and training. He pioneered many lasting innovations: promotion based on merit, decentralisation of the Criminal Investigations Branch (CIB), development of wireless patrols, establishment of a provident fund, inducing men of higher intelligence to enlist (*e.g.*, Jim Cairns), adult education facilities for the force, car owners' certificates, boosting its equestrian capability. Hetherington: 'He was also an autocrat though tolerably benevolent unless someone tried to undermine his rule. He did not endear himself to the government – Ministers of the Crown who tried to interfere in the domestic administration of the force ran into a brick wall'.

Knighted in 1935, Blamey's role came to an end when he resigned in 1936, shortly before it was evident that the State Government would be dismissing him after an ongoing war between the Police Chief and the press (which came to a head when there was a clumsy cover-up of a shooting of a superintendent of the CIB while waiting for a police informer).

Since 1931 Blamey had remained active in the Militia, as General Officer Commanding (GOC) 3rd Division. Like every Australian Divisional Commander at that time, he had to worry along as well as he could, with a collection of ill-equipped and under-manned units in his hope that his patient acceptance of the

²The Order of the Bath is an order of chivalry and was founded in 1725 for service of the highest calibre. It has a civil and military division and was awarded in the following ranks: Knight Grand Cross (GCB), Knight Commander (KCB) and Companion (CB).

³Companion of St Michael and St George.

⁴Distinguished Service Order.

⁵Cross of war for external theatres of operations.

peacetime frustrations would have its reward when the inevitable World War broke out subsequently. But Blamey's tour of duty ended in May 1937 and his name was added to the Army 'Unemployed List'.

Now 52, jobless and with difficulty in paying his way, the greatest of all his meagre assets was the reputation he had won in the war of 1914-18. Even his most trenchant critics could not deny the excellence and sweep of his achievements both in the Dardanelles Campaign and later in Europe. But his military reputation was of little value when his police career ended. Other, younger men had risen in the staff corps since Blamey's day. It looked to be a sad ending for a man whose military career had shone so bright.

Throughout he followed closely the rise of fascism in Germany and developments in Japan, making public and prescient warnings about the prospects of our nation again being called to action, urging preparedness. Hetherington: 'In early 1938 he was engaged by Melbourne radio 3UZ to give a series of Sunday night commentaries on international affairs, particularly the rising threat of another world war. Our political leaders at the time seemed blind to the dangers. Blamey's talks (anonymously as *The Sentinel*) emphasised the peril in the growing vigour of Japan's expansionism and persistently warned of the inevitability of a Pacific War.'

And so it proved!

In the last weeks of 1938 he told his radio audience: "The conditions of national safety today are constant vigilance and maximum strength to resist. Without these, neither time nor space can avail. Time, conditioned by distance, has lost much of its safety value in this century".

After Hitler seized Czechoslovakia in March 1939, *The Sentinel's* calm and unhurried voice broadcast: "As this power has been unleashed, there remains for the rest of us to ensure only that we develop such power as will persuade the Germans that our view of right will be maintained at all costs".

Hetherington: 'As Italy overthrew Abyssinia, as Japan grew more flagrantly aggressive in the Far East, as Germany and Italy joined the Francoists in destroying the Spanish Republic, four men in high public office (Fred Shedden, Secretary of the Department of Defence; Robert Menzies, Attorney-General; Richard Casey, Treasurer; and Sir Henry Gullet, MP and war correspondent, two of whom had served alongside Blamey in France), knowing war was inevitable, looked about them for a man capable of leading Australia's land forces in the coming conflict. Although at that time there could hardly have been a less popular candidate, the more they studied the want the more they were persuaded Blamey was their man'.

In September 1938 the Government created a

Manpower Committee and called Blamey out of retirement as its Chairman. Shortly after he was also appointed Controller-General of a new Recruiting Secretariat to increase the strength of the Militia.

But high military command was not assured. Prime Minister Joseph Lyons wanted nothing to do with him. "What about the senior people we have in the Army now?" he demanded of Casey. "We have some brilliant staff officers" Casey admitted, "But Blamey is a commander. That's the difference". At last the PM agreed to meet and Blamey was invited to Canberra. When the talk was over the PM was bubbling over. "My word Dick, he's somebody, isn't he!" Lyons enthused. "I believe you".

World War II

Australia declared war on Germany in September 1939. Four weeks later, Major-General Thomas Blamey was appointed GOC of the 6th Australian Division, Australian Imperial Force (AIF). A fortnight later he was promoted Lieutenant-General. He was then 55.

Hetherington: 'The Australian manufacturing picture was dark with only the sketchy nucleus of an armaments industry. Blamey and his officers had to carry the burden which a long-standing inertia had created – they could go only so far in training the AIF to fight a modern war'.

Blamey proceeded to select the nucleus of his staff that was to serve him, with few exceptions, throughout the war. It included Clive Steele (Engineers), Samuel Burston (Medical) and Charles Lloyd (Administration). For the critical post of GSO I he chose a 45-year-old Lt. Col. Sydney Rowell. As his infantry brigade commanders, he chose three militia officers: A S Allen, Leslie Morshead and Stanley Savige and, to command the artillery brigade, Edmund Herring. None of them was quite sure why he had been preferred to some others in a large field of likely candidates. Blamey stated over a dinner, telling them: "I've chosen you because I think you will look after the troops. That is my chief concern" – thus letting them know what he expected of them above all else.

(Recent scholarly research has determined that his demands for his generals to *keep the casualties low* and his conduct of the war saved 35,000 Diggers from being killed).

Herring, later GOC I Corps, who became Victoria's Chief Justice and Lieutenant Governor, noted:

'He made it plain that he had considered how each of us was likely to treat and care for his men'.

Later, about New Guinea: *"He was a great man to serve. You always knew where you stood with him'.*

Blamey had remembered that in the war of 1914-18 British Commanders 'had a tendency to forget or refuse to see that the Dominions were no longer colonies whose forces could be ordered here there

and everywhere, broken up into handy packages without regard to their national character, and in general treated like military lackeys who must obey without question the orders handed down to them from on high' (Hetherington). Blamey 'an Australian to his innermost being' foresaw the same would happen again to our nation's detriment and at the risk of his soldiers' lives. He took steps to ensure a watertight Charter from the Government.

Prepared by Sir Owen Dixon of the High Court, 'it was a model of simplicity and lucidity' and began:

'The Force (is) to be recognised as an Australian Force under its own Commander who will have direct responsibility to the Commonwealth Governmentno part of the force to be detached or employed apart from the Force without his consent'.

Hetherington: 'Blamey was to have repeated need in the Middle East of the authority which the Charter placed in his hands - to defeat attacks on the powers of his commanders and also to protect the ordinary soldier from rough usage by people who mistakenly supposed themselves entitled to force their ideas of discipline on the Australian fighting man'. 'Later in the war, Blamey fought for these rights in defiance of the wishes of Winston Churchill himself'.

In February 1940, the Australian War Cabinet approved formation of the 7th Australian Division, linked with the 6th Australian Division under Blamey as Commander 1 Australian Corps. Two brigades of the latter were the first of the AIF formations to embark for Palestine. Blamey followed in June, settling into headquarters in the ancient Arab town of Gaza.

Hetherington: 'Most of Blamey's officers found him gruff, demanding, thoroughly formidable. When they knew him better they realised that, once an officer had won his trust, Blamey would support him through hell and high water. He expected loyalty from his staff and gave loyalty in return. If a conscientious officer made a mistake in good faith Blamey, whatever he might say to the defaulter in private, would let nobody else criticise him, not excepting a Cabinet Minister or a General'.

The British commander, General Wavell had fewer than 86,000 to defend Egypt, Palestine, Sudan, Kenya, Somaliland, Aden and Cyprus. The Middle East could hope for only a small trickle of equipment for some time as France had fallen and Italy's entry into the war had closed the Mediterranean.

Later, as Field Marshal, Lord Wavell said of Blamey:

'Probably the best soldier we had in the Middle East. Not an easy man to deal with but a very satisfactory man to deal with. His military knowledge was unexampled, and he was positive, firm and a very satisfactory commander'.

From the reticent Wavell, these were telling words.

In late 1940 the War Cabinet gazetted Thomas Blamey as GOC AIF Middle East.

Hetherington: 'Even those Australian officers close to Blamey who did not like everything about him liked the tireless way he strove to make sure that the AIF should fight as a national force, and fight with the best possible chance of winning'. 'No man could have been more active. While the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions were being gathered in Palestine and Egypt, it was not rare for Blamey to travel 800-900 miles by car in a single week from Gaza to Cairo, down the desert road to Alexandria, and back to Gaza, with a dozen or more stops enroute to see to Army business'.

Unlike in WWI where the British Canteens Service was flawed and amassed huge profit without benefiting their Australian customers at all, Tom decided on an Australian Army Canteens Service (AACS), believing it could do a lot for the fighting soldier when the going was hard. He made it a rule that the AACS should not operate only in the safer back areas but must go into battle with the troops.

Blamey also understood how boredom can erode morale and would spend money to make an unsympathetic environment more bearable, such as arranging to meet the request of the AIF Ordnance Depot on the banks of the Ismalia Canal for a military band. He pressed the Government to commission the pick of Australia's artists to visit the army in-situ. He astounded others with his familiarity with the history and customs of Palestine, the complex ritual and symbolism of a Jewish festival.

When in early 1941 the Germans were clearly preparing to strike into Greece through Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, Churchill ordered Wavell to find 'the largest possible army and air forces for Greece'. The Australian 6th and 7th Divisions and the New Zealanders were to bear the brunt of the fighting. British General Maitland Wilson was to command.

Blamey quickly concluded that the expedition was doomed. His forebodings were justified when the battle began – the 7th Division did not even reach Greece, the Greek formations proved wanting. Tom was torn between his duty, on the one side, to the Australian Government and, on the other, to the C-in-C Middle East. In the end he sought permission to send an appreciation to the former. The celebrated KC⁶, Brigadier Eugene Gorman, thought it a masterly example of a complex military appreciation reduced to essentials. But the die was set. Blamey left for Greece. Things did not go well.

Blamey's Aide-de-Camp (ADC) Norman Carlyon thought Tom behaved oddly when they took a car to

⁶King's Counsel.

cruise along the coast, stopping to climb out and stroll along a beach of firm sand, as if seeking convalescent spots or places for a leave centre, insisting Carlyon make a record of Blamey's detailed impressions on a tourist map.

In the early hours of April, Wavell called at Blamey's HQ to discuss the hopeless military situation and an impending evacuation. Blamey produced the map Carlyon had marked with reluctance saying "I think you will find these are the beaches to evacuate from".

Blamey's HQ was frequently under bombing. Near Larisa some Australian infantrymen went to ground when planes came over. As the bombs started falling one of them shouted "Cripes, I wish I was back in Athens with old Blamey!". "Shut up, you bloody mug" one of his mates hissed. "He's in the next trench". Carlyon was with Blamey in many heavy bomb attacks in Greece and never saw him betray a symptom of the jitters.

Blamey reasoned that the Germans would try to overwhelm his forces by 25 April (ANZAC Day). Withdrawal was in progress. On 23 April, ANZAC Corps HQ had issued its last order. Blamey was ordered to report to Wavell in Cairo. He argued that he could not leave, at least until ANZAC Day. But Wavell's reasons were unanswerable after the inglorious loss of Generals O'Connor and Neame in the Western Desert retreat less than three weeks before. Blamey had not known what post he was returning to but the newspapers he saw overnighting in the Alexandria hotel raised his eyebrows. He was to be Deputy C-in-C Middle East.

The Australian official historian described the near-miraculous allied retreat from Greece in 1941 that Blamey and Sydney Rowell devised: 'the fighting withdrawal of more than 300 miles, generally along a single road, with the loss of but one fighting unit, was an outstanding military achievement'.

Blamey, four months after the Greek campaign ended stated:

'The outstanding lesson ... is that no reason whatever should outweigh military considerations when it is proposed to embark on a campaign.... The main principles that must be satisfied are that the objects to be secured should be fully understood, the means to achieve the objects should be adequate and the plan should be such as will ensure success.

All three essentials were lacking .., with the resultant inevitable failure.... The main reason for despatch of the force appears to have been a political one'.

Wavell was replaced as C-in-C Middle East in July 1941 by General Sir Claude Auchinleck at a time when Blamey had become very concerned about the weakened condition of Morshead's 9th Division

garrison at Tobruk which was cut off in April. He put his case for its relief resting on three arguments: first, the decline in the troops' physical fitness; second, the desirability of grouping all Australians in the Middle East into a single force; and third, the ready availability of relief troops. Menzies supported Blamey by cable to Churchill. Auchinleck opposed it consistently and vigorously. Blamey went to the General HQ (GHQ) conference in mid-September, knowing he was going to chance his own neck in a last bid.

"Gentlemen, I think you don't understand the position... Australia is an independent nation. She came into this war under certain definite agreements. Now, in the name of my government, I demand relief of these troops". There had been a stunned silence. Then Auchinleck shrugged and said "well, if that's the way you put it, we have no alternative". *"So now, I'm the most hated man in the Middle East"*, Blamey stated later. Blamey proved right – and was doing his duty to ensure the AIF was so grouped that it might be ready to fight as a national force, not in bits and pieces once detached under British command.

With a new Labor Government in Australia, Blamey was anxious to make personal contact with John Curtin, Ben Chifley, H V Evatt, Frank Forde and others that he knew only as names. He flew out of Cairo in November for Australia. Calling at Malaya on the way he met General Gordon Bennett in Singapore and told him he intended asking the Government to withdraw the 8th Division to send to the Middle East (it had been posted to Malaya only as a temporary measure, not under Blamey's command). The War Cabinet declined. 'As it turned out the Australians ...were engulfed in the disaster in Singapore through no fault of their own.. some 15,000 officers and men – nearly five times as many as had ever before been taken prisoner in a single operation – went into over three years of agonising captivity and were lost for the rest of the war. It would be hard to over-estimate the value this force would have had to Australia and to the Allies, had it been available a little later in the Pacific war' (Hetherington).

In December 1941 Blamey was back in Cairo. The Tobruk men had 'broken out' (as they told it, with a dash of truth). The Germans and Italians were in general retreat in the desert. But Auchinleck's offensive was overshadowed by events far away. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour and landed in northern Malaya. They had attacked Thailand, the Philippines, Wake and Guam, Hong Kong. They were coming south.

Return to Australia 1942

(continued in United Service, Volume 75, Number 2, June 2024....)

