

## **Blamey as Commander**

### **Submission paper for: Hard Fought: Australia in the Mediterranean War 1940-1945**

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At the start of WWII, having learnt great leadership as chief of staff to General Monash in the First World War, Blamey was ready for war. He had experienced the best of British commanders as staff officer 1st Division under British Major General Harold Walker. Walker is reputed to have been the best divisional commander at Gallipoli and is known for standing up to his superiors when the lives of his men were needlessly put at risk. Unfortunately, Blamey also experienced the worst of British commanders. The 1st Division of the AIF had the incredible misfortune to be commanded by Lieutenant General Hubert Gough in what was later the Fifth Army. Light on planning, heavy on charging, catastrophically high on casualties and depressingly devoid of progress, Australian (and British) divisions were thrown into the Battle of Pozières (23 July–3 September 1916) in quick succession. Despite excellent planning which gained Blamey a mention in despatches, the 1st Division lost 5285 men on the first day.

The key lesson for Blamey was that Australian commanders had little recourse to resist or even modify orders from their British commanders. Monash, when Corps commander in 1918, through considerable personal effort, managed to modify British command somewhat. This was especially so after his success at Le Hamel but the national model to follow was that of the Canadians. The Canadian government insisted that their corps have a unified command under a single commander. Early in 1917 they took the final step by insisting that the corps commander be Canadian. Most importantly, the Canadian Corps had strong political support in the form of their Minister of Militia and Defence, Sam Hughes, a man who did not like the British. Hughes spent much of the war in the UK agitating British command behind the scenes with the implied threat that the Canadians could withhold their forces if not treated correctly. This gave the Canadian commander enough leverage to modify plans for engagement in battle and in so doing reduced the Canadian casualty rate to substantially below that of the Australians. The Australians were unified under Monash half way through 1918 but this was too little too late to

drive the casualty rate down, especially as they did not have a politician protecting them as the Canadians did.

On 13 October 1939, a month after the outbreak of the WWII in Europe, Blamey was promoted to lieutenant general and took command of the 6th Division as the first formation of the Second AIF. His choice of brigade commanders were Brigadiers Arthur Allen, Leslie Morshead and Stanley Savage, while Brigadier Edmund Herring commanded the artillery. These were all officers from the Militia whose capability was well known to Blamey from World War I. In addition to capability, he chose the men 'because I think you will look after the troops' – always a consideration for Blamey.

It was clear that the AIF would serve overseas under the British. Blamey had considerable experience of this and feared a repeat of the British ad-hoc use of Diggers and the constant undermining of Australian command, as had been his experience in World War I. He was also well aware of the contrast between the Australian high casualty rate and the better record of the Canadians. For Blamey, the important missing link in the Australian command chain was a direct explicit link of military command back to the Australian Government. To correct that he generated a charter with the Australian Government. In essence, the Blamey charter specified that the Australian Military Force had to be recognised as being under its own commander, who had direct responsibility to the Commonwealth Government and who had the right to communicate directly with them. The Force could not be broken up, moved or deployed without the commander's consent. In general, the Australian and British governments had to agree how the Australian Force was to be used, but that the Australian commander could act in an emergency and inform the Australian Government of his actions. Operational control was to be through the Australian Commander in Chief of the area subject to the constraints mentioned above. Similar charters were given to other Australian commanders when they operated independently of Blamey under British command.

The British were acutely aware of the charter and chafed under its constraints. They tested how well it would be adhered to on various division commanders but most held firm to Blamey's directive that the men could not be released without his say so.

For reasons known only to himself, Winston Churchill wanted to send a force to 'save' Greece from a 27 division German onslaught. This was despite the Greek government's reluctance for a British force to be sent. Blamey was well aware of the dangers present in the Greek adventure and was implacably opposed to any Australian involvement. However, he wasn't ready for the side deal between the two Prime Ministers Menzies and Churchill to send an Australian division to fight in Greece. This side deal was represented to him as an agreement by the Australian Government. It wasn't until the 6th Division was half way to Greece that he discovered the truth but by then it was too late. To compound his dismay, he discovered that there was no plan to evacuate the force from what was now the inevitable annihilation that awaited them.

As the German divisions began their onslaught, in addition to his own command, Blamey was given command of the NZ division and an assortment of British artillery and tanks. Immediately that occurred, the forces began a fighting withdrawal under Blamey's orders. Leaving much of the command decisions to his subordinates, Blamey got to work on the important job of arranging an evacuation. He began by trying to persuade with the two British area commanders, Lieutenant General Henry Maitland Wilson in Greece and General Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief Middle East to convince Churchill to order an evacuation.

Despite Blamey's efforts, Churchill refused to consider an evacuation for 10 days. It had required all Blamey's persuasive powers to get an agreement for an evacuation to save the Allied force. The evacuation was completed eight days later and the men were shipped under heavy harassment from German planes to either Alexandria or Crete.

Without Blamey's considerable personal power backed up by the charter it is unlikely that any of the Allies on Greece would have been saved. As it was the number of Australian deaths in Greece and Crete numbered 595 and other losses 6,719 saving the rest of the division from becoming POWs.

Blamey received a promotion to Deputy Commander in Chief Middle East Command. With that elevation, he earned a place in GHQ in Cairo but still had no meaningful participation in British strategy. He was also upset that in his absence in Greece and against his explicit orders, his forces had become scattered. The 9th Division and 18th Infantry Brigade was in Tobruk, some were in Cypress and the 7th Division was in Palestine on the way to Syria.

Once in GHQ, Blamey hardly ever travelled from Cairo. He has been criticised for not visiting the troops more often but given his experience that bad things happen to his men if he is out of contact, he clearly felt that the Australians were safest when he was close to where the decisions were made.

One notable side trip was when Blamey considered the 7th Division in Palestine was being badly commanded by General Wilson headquartered in Jerusalem 150 kilometres away from the front. After conferring with the Australian commander and agreeing that the strategy from Wilson was indeed faulty, Blamey was driven to Wilson's HQ, arriving in the early hours of the morning. He stormed into the HQ and demanded the general get out of bed. They had a heated discussion in which Blamey persuaded Wilson that his strategy was indeed correct. Wilson then said he would issue orders in the morning whereby Blamey demanded Wilson ring the Australian division commander then and there; which he did. Blamey then returned to GHQ to continue monitoring the state of the Australian forces.

He was also concerned about the condition of the diggers fighting in Tobruk. While Blamey was in Greece, the Australian 9th Division, with Major General Leslie Morshead in command, withdrew to Tobruk in front of General Erwin Rommel's first push from Libya. Little did they know that they would become besieged there until September. Blamey was well aware from his time in the Western Front that the condition of the troops deteriorates if they spend more than two weeks in the front line. Beginning almost immediately from when he returned from Greece, Blamey fought to relieve the 9th AIF Division from Tobruk before they failed due to battle fatigue. Churchill and the now Commander in Chief Middle East General Sir Claude Auchinleck

disagreed with relieving the Diggers because they stonewalled Blamey. This tussle went on for months until finally the last of the Australians was returned.

Blamey was honoured with a third knighthood and mentioned in despatches for the eighth time in the Middle East. He became the first Australian to be promoted to general while on active service. However, he was disappointed because, while he was given rank and position, he was never given an active role in strategy in the Middle East.

With the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 there was a pressing need for the Australian soldiers to come to the aid of their homeland. Churchill reluctantly agreed to release divisions. Blamey's work in the Middle East was done. He was recalled on 1 March 1942, leaving the recently promoted Lieutenant General Morshead as General Officer Commanding AIF Middle East under Blamey's overall command from Australia. Morshead had the same problems with the British as Blamey had. It is a credit to Blamey's command that the three AIF divisions fighting in the Middle East suffered a modest 3,552 combat fatalities during their two years during engagements in Greece, Crete, Syria, Tobruk and two El Alamein campaigns, to name only a selection of their battles.

Blamey's time under the British was frustrating. Being highly trained and experienced under Monash in WWI, he probably could have made a significant difference to British strategy in the Middle East.

He returned home to a promotion to Commander in Chief of the Australian Military Forces with a definite key role in organising the Australian Army for war in the Pacific as well as for home defence.

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## **Biography**

Brent has had over twenty-five years professional experience evaluating leadership. Included in that experience was four years as research director for KPMG during which time he applied many analyses similar to those applied to Blamey's record. Brent has also had published two books about leadership in business and has completed but is yet to publish a book titled 'Leadership in Crisis: Blamey at War.'

Brent has a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons) and Bachelor of Arts (Psychology Hons).