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Conflict in command during the Kokoda campaign of 1942: did General Blamey deserve the blame?

Rowan Tracey



General Sir Thomas Blamey was commander-in-chief of the Australian Military Forces during World War II. Tough and decisive, he did not resile from sacking ineffective senior commanders when the situation demanded. He has been widely criticised by more recent historians for his role in the sackings of Lieutenant-General S. F. Rowell, Major-General A. S. Allen and Brigadier A. W. Potts during the Kokoda Campaign of 1942. Rowan Tracey examines each sacking and concludes that Blamey's actions in each case were justified.

On 16 September 1950, a small crowd assembled in the sunroom of the west wing of the Repatriation General Hospital at Heidelberg in Melbourne. The group consisted of official military representatives, wartime associates and personal guests of the central figure, who was wheelchair bound – Thomas Albert Blamey. Those present were concerned that Blamey's ill health would not allow him to endure the ceremony that was about to follow. Although the governor-general, Sir William McKell, and the prime minister, Robert Menzies, were late in arriving from the airport to present Blamey with the baton of a field marshal of the British Army, Blamey's strength held out and he was able to accept the baton from the governor-general. This minor but historic ceremony recognised Blamey's service to Australia and he remains Australia's highest ranking soldier.

Despite the recognition of Blamey by the Australian Government, his reputation has suffered in recent years. Accompanying the increased interest in the Kokoda campaign in Australia, numerous books and articles have been published on the subject. In otherwise balanced histories, Blamey has come under scathing criticism. On the other hand, the performance of other key participants has received little or no scrutiny. At the time of the withdrawal of the Australian troops along the Kokoda Trail¹ in New Guinea², the senior commanders were Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell (1st Australian Corps), Major-General Arthur Allen (7th Division) and Brigadier Arnold Potts (Maroubra Force, 21st Brigade). All three officers were relieved of their commands, but under different circumstances.

High Command in Australia in 1942

In September 1938, Blamey was appointed chairman of the Commonwealth's Manpower Committee and controller-general of recruiting on the recommendation of Frederick Shedden, secretary of the Department of Defence, and with the assent of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons. Menzies, who had become prime minister after the death of Lyons, then appointed Blamey as the Army's national commander. Blamey was promoted to lieutenant-general in October 1939. His selection caused discontent among aspiring militia and regular senior officers. The decision was based on the government's view that Blamey would resolve the inherent political-military issues that would arise in operating with the British better than any other officer (Dennis *et al.* 2008, 91). This was shown clearly when he resisted pressure from his British superior officers to disperse elements of the Australian force to meet their perceived needs; and he insisted that the battle weary 9th Division be rested after their fighting at Tobruk, which was opposed by the British.

Following the outbreak of war in the Pacific, Blamey returned to Australia from the Middle East. Despite having few supporters in the governing Labor Party, Prime Minister John Curtin appointed him Commander-in-Chief, Australian Military Forces, in March 1942. Curtin knew that there was no other senior officer who could match Blamey in the position (Maitland 2005, 14). For months after the Japanese entered World War II, the Australian government clung to the view that its defence needs would be met by Great Britain and the United States. When the government decided to return troops from the Middle East to defend Australia, Curtin's disagreement with the British prime minister, Winston Churchill, over the issue, led some observers to think that Curtin was headed for another breakdown in health (Day 2003, 287). The reputation of Curtin as a great wartime prime minister hinged on his insistence that 6th and 7th Divisions return to Australia. However, when the United States moved General Douglas MacArthur to

¹"Kokoda Trail" is the official name. "Kokoda Track" is also used synonymously, both in published works and the Australian vernacular.

²This term is used throughout the essay to describe both the Territory of Papua and the Mandated Territory of New Guinea which came under military authority on 14 February 1942 when the civil administration was suspended.

Australia in March 1942 to become the Commander-in-Chief, South-West Pacific Area, he was given operational control of Australia's armed forces and control of the media. This directly undermined Australia's national interest and sovereignty. The Australian government was only too aware of this important issue from its experience in the Great War and when Blamey deployed to the Middle East in 1940, he was given a charter setting out his responsibilities to the government as well as to its allies. Also, Curtin set up the War Conference comprising himself, MacArthur and Shedden. Despite being the Australian government's principal wartime advisor, Blamey was excluded from these discussions. In consequence, he had to take a strong stand with Curtin to get direct access to the prime minister. In fact, Curtin had made it plain to MacArthur that if high level war policy needed to be discussed in his absence, Shedden had his full confidence. Blamey should be used on an 'as needed' basis (Gallaway 2000, 74). And what background did Shedden have to place him in a position above all the service chiefs in matters of war policy in Curtin's mind? Shedden had spent six months in the Great War as a lieutenant in the pay corps and later he had attended the Imperial Defence College. This was a government displaying the hallmarks of inexperience and lacking a measured response to the Japanese threat. It made Blamey's work even more difficult.

The lack of proficiency of the Australian government was mirrored in the behaviour of Australia's senior officers. Many writers have concentrated on the schism between officers of the militia and officers of the staff corps as the basis for disagreement. But this is far too simplistic. In the "generals' plot" of March 1942 for example, the officers who approached the Minister for the Army, Frank Forde, to change the Army's senior leadership, were a mixture of militia and staff corps. Differences between senior officers caused by personality traits and varying social backgrounds had already emerged in the campaigns fought in the Middle East (e.g. Braga 2004, 91). These officers were motivated by pursuing their own advancement and showed no reluctance in maligning their fellow officers, whether militia or staff corps. Rivalries between senior officers led some observers to comment on whether their main efforts were being directed at the enemy or in quarrelling with one another (Maitland 2005, 12).

Despite growing knowledge in Australia of the debacle of the campaign in the Philippines, MacArthur and his staff managed to ensure that Curtin and Shedden remained in "contented ignorance" of these matters (Gallaway 2000, 76). The whole MacArthur legend was accepted without question. When MacArthur was given operational command of Australian armed forces and responsibility for Australia's strategic direction, he was expected to place Australian officers on his Allied Headquarters. Even though the United States president and MacArthur's superior officer, General Marshall, expected this course

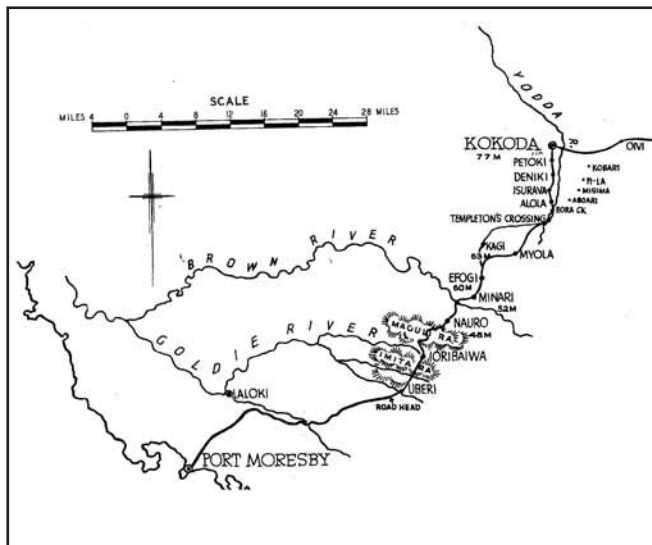
of action, MacArthur excluded Australians by saying that there were no suitable senior officers available (Thompson 2008, 289). All eleven senior positions on the headquarters were filled by United States officers, eight of whom came with MacArthur from the Philippines. The 'Bataan gang', as they became known, controlled the war, but remained in profound ignorance of the conditions the Australian soldiers faced in New Guinea. MacArthur's overriding concern was in his rivalry with the United States Navy in waging the war against the Japanese in the Pacific. Through his control of the media, MacArthur ensured that Blamey and the Australian forces received little credit for their fighting in New Guinea and in the islands further north. The Japanese landings on the north coast of New Guinea in July 1942 and their subsequent advance south along the Kokoda Trail placed the Australian government in a state of panic.

Lieutenant-General S. F. Rowell

One of Curtin's Ministers, John Beasley, told cabinet colleagues that if Port Moresby was to fall, Blamey should be there and fall with it (Carlyon 1980, 104). Curtin was a troubled man. During a meeting with him on 17 September 1942, MacArthur expressed the view that Blamey should go to New Guinea to 'energise the situation'. Curtin did not question MacArthur's advice and told Blamey of his decision. Blamey reminded Curtin that he had recently visited New Guinea and that Rowell had the situation under control. Further, it was not possible for him to carry out his wide span of responsibilities in Australia from Port Moresby. Curtin's decision did not change and on 22 September 1942 he telephoned Blamey to tell him that he should not remain in Brisbane for another day (Day 2003, 395).



Awaiting Blamey at Port Moresby's Seven-Mile airfield was his corps commander, Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell. Two days prior to his arrival in New Guinea, Blamey sent a letter to Rowell by safe hand, explaining the reasons for his return so soon after his previous visit. There was no need for Blamey to write such a conciliatory letter to a subordinate, but he was aware that Rowell carried an underlying antipathy towards him from their service together in the Middle East and Blamey wanted to avoid any unnecessary friction on his arrival (Carlyon 1980, 105). Rowell thought that Blamey's presence in New Guinea showed a lack of confidence in him and he resented the fact that it coincided with the halting of the Japanese on the Kokoda Trail. He believed this would mean that he would lose the recognition that was due to him in turning back the Japanese (Edgar 1999, 187). Another point of contention for Rowell was the fact that Blamey had not brought his own headquarters to New Guinea



with him. Blamey had not done so because his headquarters was better placed in Australia to attend to its strategic and other responsibilities and to move it would impact on the limited logistic support between Australia and New Guinea. In any case, this was the commander's decision to make and Rowell knew this. Why Rowell could not maintain a professional military relationship with Blamey is not altogether clear. After all, under Blamey's leadership, Rowell had been promoted from lieutenant-colonel in October 1939 to lieutenant-general in April 1942. When Blamey explained to Rowell that he had been ordered back to New Guinea by Curtin following the Australian withdrawal from Ioribaiwa ridge, Rowell argued that he still should not have come. This was despite admitting that he did not understand the political situation in Australia. There is no evidence to suggest that in Rowell's long military career he had refused a direct order from a person with the standing of a prime minister, but Rowell had made up his own mind not to tolerate the presence of Blamey prior to his arrival (McDonald 2004, 351). Following a heated meeting on Blamey's first night in New Guinea, Rowell declared to one of his staff that if Blamey was a real man he would have '...sacked me on the spot' (McDonald 2004, 352). Blamey asked a senior officer who had accompanied him to Port Moresby, Major-General Samuel Burston, to counsel Rowell to help resolve the situation. Both men knew each other well, but this was to no avail. Rowell further exacerbated the situation by denying Blamey access to situation reports compiled from information from forward commanders (Carlyon 1980, 108). In a military structure, there can only be one result from such insubordination and Rowell admitted as much in a letter to Blamey the following year (Hetherington 1973, 256). On the morning of 28 September 1942 after further heated discussions, Rowell was relieved of his command by Blamey. Rowell's temperament played a significant part in his downfall (Dennis *et al.* 2008, 455) and it was noted that he was in a depressed state prior to his dismissal (McDonald 2004, 352). Edgar (1999, 206-

210), who examined the psychological state of senior officers in the Kokoda campaign, might well have included Rowell on his list.

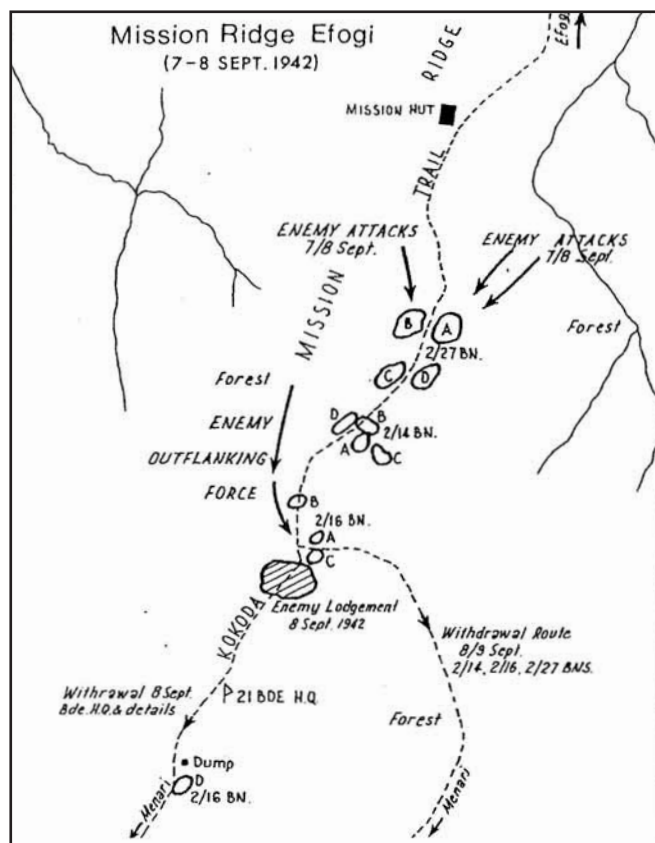


Brigadier A. W. Potts

A Gallipoli veteran, Brigadier Arnold Potts took command of Maroubra Force at Alola on 24 August 1942. Concurrently, he was concentrating his 21st Brigade to provide relief for Maroubra Force. Along the Kokoda Trail, he was responsible for a series of desperate delaying actions against the advancing Japanese. Potts, who shared the extremely arduous conditions on the Trail with his soldiers, was held in great esteem by them. He was noted for his energy and mental strength. Growing pressure mounted on Potts to take offensive action against the Japanese. In particular, it originated from MacArthur in Australia who, with faulty intelligence on the strength of the Japanese and with no understanding of the conditions under which the fighting occurred, believed that the Australian soldiers were not prepared to fight. Following the withdrawal from Eora Creek and Templeton's Crossing, Potts was expected to make every effort to hold the logistic base, Lake Myola. Potts was unable to do this and withdrew to a high ridge to the south of Efogi. There, for the first time, Potts was able to assemble his complete brigade, even though two of his battalions were under-strength from the incessant fighting. Both of his superior officers, Allen and Rowell, were concerned at the loss of Myola and the lack of offensive action. However, if MacArthur and Blamey in Australia were not aware of the struggle facing Potts, neither were Rowell or Allen. This was because no liaison officer had been deployed forward of divisional headquarters (Braga 2004, 197), which was a serious flaw in the command structure (Horner 1978, 152). In lieu of trained liaison officers, Rowell had used war correspondents, but they were not equipped for the task.

The ensuing battle at Efogi/Brigade Hill was fought from 7-9 September 1942. Following probing patrols, the Japanese attacked in force from Efogi and simultaneously made a flanking incursion from the west close to the rear of the Australian position, which isolated brigade headquarters. Many examples of selfless bravery by the Australians were evidenced in this battle. 2/27th Battalion took the full force of the initial Japanese assault, provided a strong rearguard action to allow the rest of the Australians to withdraw, and made a tortuous journey for two weeks to safety, carrying their wounded. The depleted 2/14th and 2/16th Battalions came under sustained attack and their courage in fighting the Japanese incursion to their rear allowed the brigade headquarters to break from the battle and withdraw to Menari.

Without any analysis of the conduct of operations, Ham (2004, 230) concluded that Potts' tactics on the withdrawal to Brigade Hill were '... a brilliant defensive manoeuvre'. And later, in describing Potts' chosen defensive position, Ham (2004, 234) was of the opinion that the steepness and forest of the western slope of Brigade Hill made it '... a natural barrier to which any commander might feel comfortable turning his back'. Brune (2004, 200-201), again without military analysis, claimed that Potts had covered almost every contingency. These assertions cannot be sustained. Potts sited three independent battalion positions, plus a separate brigade headquarters. This had the potential to compromise the security of his line communications as his radio back-up was unreliable. He lost control of the battle almost from the outset when the Japanese incursion cut his telephone lines (Edgar 1999, 167). Further damage was done to 2/27th Battalion communications by Japanese mortar fire. On the afternoon of 6 September 1942, Potts moved the 2/27th Battalion position about 800 yards up the ridge from its initial position. After further adjustment by the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Geoffrey Cooper, the battalion was located about 300 yards above the old mission hut. The position was on very steep ground with poor visibility. Following the move, the soldiers had little time to dig in with no tools apart from 'bayonets, tin hats and fingers' (Paull 1958, 193). Therefore, the defensive position was very vulnerable to enemy fire, particularly indirect fire. In light of these shortcomings, the resistance of 2/27th Battalion to the Japanese attacks on 8 September 1942 was outstanding.



On the night of 7 September 1942, approximately 90 Japanese using local guides scaled the ridge from the west carrying a Juki machine gun. This was a standard Japanese tactic to bypass the main force and cut off their withdrawal route. The feat of the Japanese should be acknowledged, but the western approach is no steeper than many other parts along the Trail. The Japanese incursion was not detected by any patrols or sentries and the Japanese established a dominant position by first light on the Trail between the brigade headquarters and the rear battalions. In fact, Potts was fortunate not to lose his own life to a sniper's bullet. Ham (2004, p. 237) excused Potts for this oversight, considering it was understandable that '... it never occurred to Potts that an attack could come from this direction'. With the loss of control by Potts (which included command of the brigade mortars), there was always going to be the problem of timing an orderly withdrawal. The alternate withdrawal route to Menari, that was identified by Captain Herbert Kienzle³ and reconnoitred by 2/14th Battalion, was inadequate. It passed to the east of the established Japanese position on the Trail, but was poorly defined, causing difficulty for night movement. This hampered the withdrawal of 2/27th Battalion, which had rearguard responsibilities as well as transport of the wounded (Sublet 2000, 79)⁴. Understandably, 2/27th Battalion was slowed down considerably in its withdrawal and was not able to return to the Trail to defend it. The battalion was missing-in-action for nearly two weeks. Subsequently, Ham (2004, 238) acknowledged that Potts' fighting withdrawal had become a rout and quite reasonably Potts' fitness for command was reviewed by his superior commanders.

A report sent back from Menari with the first liaison officer (Captain Geoffrey Lyon) to reach the 21st Brigade, said in part that Brigade Hill could be held for only two to four days as there was no water on the position and supplies were short. Upon request from Major-General Allen, Potts confirmed the report, leaving Rowell and Allen alarmed at the situation. They believed that Potts' judgement was affected by the strain of the campaign (Edgar 1999, 171). Potts was relieved of his command on 10 September 1942 and reported back to Allen and then Rowell on 11 September 1942. Rowell was not pleased with the lack of progress in halting the Japanese or in the content of some of Potts' communications (Edgar 1999, 176). On 23 September, Rowell returned Potts to command of 21st Brigade, which had by then withdrawn to Itiki, as he believed that Potts had gained from his experience on the Trail (Paull 1958, 256). With their strong

³Captain Kienzle, a plantation owner from the Yodda valley, was serving in the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit, formed on 10 April 1942. He had the onerous responsibility for establishing and maintaining the lines of supply to the Australian troops fighting on the Kokoda Trail. For his wartime service, he was made a member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

⁴Local carriers were held back at Menari as they were not permitted in the combat area.

personalities, Blamey and Potts inevitably argued at Sogeri, exacerbating the situation. Their difference in rank could lead to only one result. On 22 October 1942, Blamey informed Potts that he was posted to Darwin and that Brigadier Ivan Dougherty⁵ would replace him. Potts had a dislike for authority (Edgar 1999, 270), an example of which was a discourteous discussion he had with the Minister for the Army on one of his visits (Edgar 1999, 242).

Major-General A. S. (“Tubby”) Allen

Major General Arthur Allen was also a veteran of the Great War and had the singular distinction of commanding at each level from platoon commander to divisional commander on active service. In June 1941, he took command of 7th Division, which was sent to New Guinea in August 1942. The withdrawal of 21st Brigade back along the Kokoda Trail has been discussed above. It was not until the battle at Brigade Hill that Allen sent a liaison officer forward to report on the fighting conditions. This was a significant omission by Allen who was not able to understand fully the difficulties Potts faced. Nor was he able to move forward himself as he was also responsible for the defence of Port Moresby (Braga 2004, 200). His responsibility for Port Moresby was removed on 9 September 1942 and subsequently he was able to move his headquarters to the Kokoda Trail at the village of Uberi. On 16 September 1942, Allen agreed to his brigade commander’s (Brigadier Kenneth Eather⁶) request to withdraw from Ioribaiwa to Imita Ridge to form a firm base from which to advance. The withdrawal created panic and uncertainty in Australia, which resulted in Blamey’s arrival in New Guinea under orders from Curtin. After Rowell’s termination as corps commander, Allen made it clear to Blamey his interest and experience for the position (Braga 2004, 219), but Blamey selected Lieutenant General Edmund Herring⁷ as the replacement. This decision had more to do with the eventual dismissal of Allen than any direct intervention by Blamey. Allen had long standing differences with Herring dating back at least to their previous service together in Palestine in 1941. Their personalities and social background had little in common. Prior to his arrival in New Guinea, Herring



Generals Blamey and Allen conferring in Beirut in 1941 [AWM - 020007]

formed the opinion that he wanted a new leadership team when he took command. He favoured Dougherty to become Commander, 21st Brigade (which had now eventuated), and he wanted Major-General George Vasey⁸ as one of his divisional commanders (Braga 2004, 236-237). As Allen’s division advanced north along the Kokoda Trail, a poisonous relationship developed between his headquarters and Herring’s headquarters. Herring rarely communicated with Allen. This was left to Blamey. Herring interpreted Allen’s signals as indicating excessive caution and lack of offensive intent (Braga 2004, 241). Blamey had previously asked Allen to tell him if he needed relief, as Blamey became concerned about Allen’s fitness for continued command (Braga 2004, 230-231).

Pressure from MacArthur on the Australian high command persisted as he was concerned about what he saw as unnecessarily slow progress in driving the Japanese back to the north coast. This became difficult because the Japanese had established two major delaying positions, at Templeton’s Crossing and at Eora Creek. MacArthur was of the view that the lack of casualties in the Australian advance showed an unwillingness to engage the enemy. MacArthur’s words were passed on directly to Allen by Blamey, which infuriated Allen. MacArthur placed more pressure on Blamey and, on the night of the 26 October 1942, Blamey and Herring agreed to relieve Allen of his command. Vasey flew to Myola on 28 October 1942 and Allen took the return flight on 29 October 1942. When Vasey’s health became an issue in December 1942, Blamey considered replacing him with Allen, but Herring disagreed. The precarious situation of supply support that had hampered Allen during the advance was evidenced when 25th Brigade reached Kokoda with their rations expended (Braga 2004, 256).

In November 1944, Blamey recommended Allen for a knighthood in recognition of his service to Australia, but this was not granted by the Labor Government even though Blamey raised it again prior to his retirement. Rowell’s opinion of Allen diminished during the 1950s. He accepted the more general opinion of Allen, that he was a good brigade commander, but he had been promoted one level above his competence (Braga 2004, 298).

Assessment

When Blamey was ordered to take command in New Guinea by Curtin, the prime minister had no idea of the ramifications of his ill-considered decision (Paull 1958, 248). As well, he had placed MacArthur in a position of power that undermined Australia’s sovereignty and placed Blamey in an invidious situation. Curtin failed in his responsibility to the Australian people by divesting

⁵Brigadier Dougherty proved to be an able commanding officer in the Middle East and, on return to Australia in March 1942, he was promoted to command 23rd Brigade. In October 1942, he took command of 21st Brigade in New Guinea.

⁶Brigadier Eather commanded 25th Brigade which replaced 21st Brigade at Iorabaiwa Ridge.

⁷General Herring was an artillery officer who won the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross in the Great War. Prior to his posting to New Guinea, he commanded Northern Territory Force.

⁸General Vasey, a Great War veteran, commanded 19th Brigade in its hard fighting in Greece and Crete in 1941. He commanded 6th Division before his posting as Commander, 7th Division.

control of its military affairs to MacArthur (Braga 2004, 209). Each of the dismissals – of Rowell, Potts and Allen – was under very different circumstances. It is common practice today to find these dismissals bundled together and Blamey portrayed as the unreasonable perpetrator of them all. The resentment created by Blamey's intemperate address to 21st Brigade at Koitaki and later to the brigade's officers on 9 November 1942 (Carlyon 1980, 110-111), endured well after World War II⁹. It galvanised opposition against Blamey, which resulted in the concerted denigration of his time in New Guinea. Journalist Raymond Paull, author of the first comprehensive review of the Kokoda campaign (Paull 1958), could hardly be described as taking an independent view of Blamey's decisions. As a soldier in Darwin he was in Potts' brigade and he largely accepted Rowell's account of events, giving prime acknowledgement to the input of Rowell, Allen and Potts in researching his book. Even the foreword to the book was written by Rowell!¹⁰ In 1974, Rowell published his autobiography, which not surprisingly placed himself in the best possible position (Rowell 1974). He did not even acknowledge his role in the dismissal of Potts. He had pleaded loyalty to Blamey (Hetherington 1973, 256) after he returned to Australia, but on many occasions his actions and words were undeniably the opposite. The events described by Paull and Rowell have largely gone unchallenged.

On the other hand, Blamey did not write an account of his wartime experiences. This was in line with his indifference to public opinion. Blamey eschewed contact with the press, which was a serious short-coming¹¹. He could not understand why a man holding public office could not quarantine his private life and when, as chief commissioner of police in Victoria, he was advised of the difficulties that this attitude could bring upon himself, he did not change (Hetherington 1973, 64). As commander-in-chief, he was plagued by misunderstandings that could have been easily resolved if he had cared about his public image and explained himself (Carlyon 1980, 155). Nevertheless, Blamey made an outstanding contribution to Australia during World War II and he had no peer. As well, he was the only Allied commander to retain his command from the outset to the finish of the Second World War.

Nothing in the preceding paragraphs diminishes the exceptional valour and endurance, under extremely adverse conditions, of the Australian soldiers on the Kokoda Trail in 1942.

⁹It is worth noting that the brigade commander, Brigadier Dougherty, who was present at Koitaki, was of the opinion that Blamey's address was misconstrued – see Hetherington 1973, 263; and Maitland 2005, 17.

¹⁰Following World War II, Rowell reached the highest position in the Australian Army (chief of the general staff) from which he retired at the end of 1954.

¹¹Blamey's position could not have been more opposite to the approach of the 'theatrically'-inclined MacArthur, who was a master of handling the press and had complete control of the Australian media.

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