

Origin and Record
of
Blamey's House
December 1939 January 1947

Shortly after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in September 1939, and Australia's entry into the war, it was apparent to the Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Forces, General Sir Thomas Blamey, that there was an immediate need for the establishment of Servicemen's Hostels in the Capital cities of Australia.

As a result of his interest in the welfare of the men under his command, Sir Thomas approached a number of leading business men, representatives of companies, Racing Clubs and other bodies, the outcome of which was a meeting at Scott's Hotel, Melbourne, on the 29th. November 1939 under the Chairmanship of Mr. J.J. Liston. It was then agreed that the General's proposal be put into effect as speedily as possible, the proposed hostel be named Blamey House, that a fund to finance it be created, and that a Committee of Management be appointed with Mr. Liston as Chairman and Brig. J.C. Stewart as Hon. Secretary.

After investigating different premises, Robb's Buildings at the corner of King and Collins Streets, which had a strong appeal owing to its locality, was selected. Due to the sympathetic understanding of the owners (J.A. MacLeod Estate) arrangements were quickly completed to lease the first floor of this building, which had previously been occupied as a Club.

Installation of plant and equipment to provide meals was at once put in hand and work proceeded rapidly, so that on the 23rd. December, 1939, a well equipped kitchen, dining room, lavatories, showers and other facilities were available for use - a limited number of Servicemen actually enjoying their first wartime Christmas dinner at the hostel. It was a proud achievement and a credit to the Committee.

Prices charged Servicemen were as follows:-

- 1/-d. ... per bed per night
- 9d. ... breakfast
- 10d. ... three-course mid day
or evening meal.

It was obvious from the outset that the cost of running the Hostel, even in these initial stages, could not be met from income, as the Committee's policy was to make only a small charge for

accommodation and meals, with a view to giving the men the best possible service at the least possible cost.

In order to meet this anticipated loss and to provide for the cost of additional plant, equipment and improvements to the leasehold premises the fund which had been launched at the inaugural meeting and generously supported from the outset, had steadily grown and was being wisely applied for the benefit of the men.

Blamey House, though established at the suggestion of the Army Commander was open house to men of all Services of the British Empire and its Allies.

In 1940 it became apparent that the demand on the Hostel would outweigh the accommodation available, and by progressive increases, 350 beds were established by 1941. Additional floor space was acquired from the owners.

The arrival of American troops in Victoria and the ever increasing demands for accommodation by our own Servicemen placed a further strain on the Hostel which by this time had become exceedingly popular.

Ultimately 515 men could be accommodated

nightly by the conversion of the single to "double-decker" beds, and the occupation of the whole of this section of Robb's Buildings.

The following accommodation bookings and the number of meals served shows the extent to which Servicemen availed themselves of the facilities at the Hostel during the seven years of the war.

	<u>Accommodation</u> <u>Bookings</u>	<u>Meals</u> <u>Served</u>
1940	25,371	39,803
1941	65,553	66,162
1942	120,599	134,735
1943	141,640	140,052
1944	138,910	137,016
1945	158,188	137,504
1946	146,699	142,684
	<u>816,960</u>	<u>797,956</u>

At times the meals served reached the high figure of 1,000 per day.

In addition to the comparatively small charges, many other services to the men who used the Hostel were free, e.g., hot and cold showers, use of towels, soap, shoe shines, mending services

(conducted by a small but enthusiastic band of voluntary lady workers) use of the well-equipped library, magazines and journals, writing room, stationery, cloak room, safe custody of personal effects and monies, Sunday night entertainment, and the Victoria League Hospitality bureau.

Christmas entertainment was made a special feature each year.

A 24 hours service was available to the men and the doors were never closed throughout the whole period.

Whilst the general direction of Blamey House was under the helpful care of a Committee of Management, the daily task fell considerably on the sympathetic and dependable shoulders of the Hon. Secretaries, Brigadier-General J. C. Stewart in the early part and Mr. James S. Parsons in the latter years.

The administration of the fund was placed in the hands of Trustees, Messrs. J. J. Liston, Leslie Bradford and Sir Robert Knox being the original Trustees. Following the deaths of Messrs. Liston and Bradford, Mr. F. P. Smith and Brigadier-General J. C. Stewart filled the vacancies so created.

Messrs. Flack and Flack - Chartered Accountants undertook the heavy responsibility (through Mr. W. Fleming) for the care and audit of the accounts throughout.

Major-General F. P. Derham acted as Hon. Solicitor, and Lieut-Colonel L. G. Buckland as advisory engineer, and Mr. Albion Walkley as Hon. Architect. Other members of the Committee of Management were - R. J. Corridon, W. S. Cox, C. J. Cruickshank, S. G. Garnsworthy, A. N. Kemsley, E. J. Kennon, A. N. Kewney, J. E. Liston, J. F. Nagle, A. S. Sturrock, G. P. Taylor and S. White.

The expert advice of all these gentlemen, so freely given, was of the greatest possible help.

During the seven years the Trustees of Blamey House received donations totalling £48,799/7/11 of which sum an amount of £27,622/2/10 was expended to offset the nett operational loss to 31st. December 1946. This included fully depreciating the cost of improvements and alterations to the leasehold premises, plant and equipment installed, and the cost of labour at the Hostel. The wages expended amounted to £42,203.

All executive and administrative

positions were carried out in an honorary capacity.

Blamey House continued to function until 14th. January, 1947. Considerable funds had accumulated as well as stocks of furnishings and equipment. The Trustees gave very careful consideration to the matter of the disposal of the surplus assets. Negotiations were entered into with Melbourne Legacy and the Carry On Club, because it was the wish of the Committee that the terms of the Trust, which required the assets to be allocated in further service on behalf of the men whom the House had helped.

The total amount available after the sale of the equipment was £24,891/16/3. This was divided by the Trustees with four-fifths (£19,913/12/3) to Melbourne Legacy and one-fifth (£4,978/4/-) to the Carry On Club.

By prior agreement between Melbourne Legacy and the Trustees of Blamey House, the money was utilised to purchase by Legacy of the property in Balcombe Rd. Beaumaris, and to alter and extend it for use as a children's home. Legacy undertook to give the home the name "Blamey House" so as to carry

forward the famous name, henceforth to provide a service for the children of deceased ex-service men.

The gift was conveyed to Legacy at a special function held at Scotts Hotel, Melbourne (where the inaugural meeting of Blamey House took place) on 9th May 1947, the handover being performed by Sir Robert Knox as Chairman of Trustees and the gift was acknowledged and the desired undertakings to preserve the name "Blamey House" were given by Legatee C. R. Carleton as President of Legacy.

Because of building reconstruction restrictions it was not possible to proceed promptly with the alterations to the Balcombe Road property. However, gradually and eventually the work was completed, and formally commenced its new and splendid service as from 8th August 1949.

The formal ceremony of the opening of the new Blamey House took place on the property on 27th November, 1949.