Savige Memorial Oration – 22 October 1954

Delivered by Legatee Brian Armstrong of Melbourne Legacy to the Federal Conference of Legacy Clubs in Canberra.

On the 15th of May this year Legacy learned to its enduring sorrow of the death of Lieut. General Sir Stanley George Savige, KBE, CB, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, for more than 30 years affectionately know to us all as Legatee Stan Savige. He was the embodiment of all those things for which Legacy stands, and each one of us who knew him and worked with him feels a great and abiding sense of personal loss. By reason of his life and work it is proper that those of us at this Conference, the first after his passing, representative of Legacy throughout the Commonwealth, and comprising so many who were his friends, so many who knew the depth of his love for Legacy, should offer our tribute to his memory and ensure, so far as we may, that the inspiration of his life and work in this Cause shall not be lots to those who follow after.

It was not ordained that Stanley George Savige should enjoy a long life, but it was to prove a life of outstanding service. Born at Morwell in Victoria some 63 years ago, he received, with his brothers and sisters, such education as was then available to a lad in a mining district. He had no particular opportunities of advancement, but from his early day he cherished a strong ambition to make a success of his life, and with this in view he lost no opportunity of adding to his knowledge.

Always a lover of the open country, a good bushman and a fine shot he became as a young man, a Scoutmaster with a keen following of boys. Even in those early days he attracted youth, and showed undoubted promise of the quality of leadership which later was to make him famous.

Opportunity came with the First World War, and he took his place as a private soldier in the original 24th Battaliion AIF. Followed Gallipoli and Anzac where his marksmanship and bush craft stood him in good stead. Conscious that his early training was not sufficient to secure the promotion he desired, he set himself to enlarge it. Only a man of fine fibre and rare determination could apply himself to study on that war torn Peninsula, where our men, hitherto untested, suffered every knwn hardship, and no man knew, from hour to hour, whether he would survive. But Savige achieved it. Himself then a Corporal, he found another Corporal who was a former schoolmaster and learned from him all that he had to teach. Savige was on his way. He was commissioned on the Field and allotted the heroic task of leading the last party off that desperate coast during the famous evacuation.

In France he became Adjutant of his Battalion and one of the best known officers in the 6th Brigade. He won the Military Cross and was mentioned in despatches. Early in 1918 he received a signal distinction. He was included in a small but distinguished band of Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers from the British and Dominion Forces most carefully selected from individual courage, and proved qualities of leadership, and was sent to Persia, under the command of Major-General Dunsterville, Kipling’s famous Stalky, to assist and mobilise the friendly tribes with a view to protecting the road to India, left wide open by the withdrawal of Russia. The story of the Dunster Force, its sufferings and achievements in the face of incredible hardships and difficulties, was later to be told by Savige in his book ‘Stalky’s Forlorn Hope’.

He merged, finally unscathed, despite his active participation in several of the bloodiest battles of all time, with rank of Captain and a DSO and MC to his credit, to say nothing of three mentions in despatches.

In later years, further decorations were to be conferred upon him but I believe he valued none of these so highly as his awards for outstanding personal bravery won in the Field when was an Officer of comparatively junior rank.

Such was the man who in August 1923, at the instance of his former commander, Major-General Sir John Gellibrand gathered round him a handful of men who had fought and laughed with him over four well remembered years. This small band adopted the name of “Legacy”, but its purpose then was, in the main, to assist in safeguarding the interests of ex-servicemen in this country. Worthy although the cause undoubtedly was, the conception and ideal which were to distinguish Legacy from all kindred post-war movements, did not emerge until two years later. The torch had not been lit. Legacy had not yet found its soul.

What has been achieved since then is known to you all. The Legacy ideal, unique in its conception, with no known counterpart elsewhere, is now accepted, welcomed and honoured throughout the Commonwealth and abroad. But in those early days the achievements of the Founder of the first of the Legacy Clubs as we know them, in the face of all manner of difficulties and frustrations are worthy of our lasting memory and thankfulness. As the source of every river lies in the hills, so must the inspiration from which stems a great conception of service to one’s fellow men be lofty and above reproach. Savige was the embodiment of this new expression of comradeship, as he was the central figure and driving force of the little Group that sponsored it. But for his zeal, his faith and determination, it is likely that the flame, newly kindled, might have flickered and died. The idea of men returned from active service pledging, for the sake only of their former comradeship, their personal assistance to the widows and above all, to the children o those who had fought beside them and paid the full price of war, was so completely new and unexpected that it was by no means readily accepted. There were no funds, no precedents to guide the new adventurers, only the clear bright flame of an ideal just envisaged, and the conviction that the Cause was unassailable. Nor were there lacking many who said the community held no place for Legacy, that it was born of sentiment only, and would quickly pass. The scoffers are gone and long since forgotten, but the torch remains and burns brighter than ever. Down the years of Legacy there are many names deserving of honour, men from all States and of all stations of life, but no name stands out in such clear and bold relief as does the name of the man we now remember. By is works you shall know him. He was, in my belief, the Soul of Legacy. He sought no office and preferred to work as one of the team. Six years went by before he accepted the Presidency of Melbourne Club, and then only because his fellows would brook no further delay.

“The spirit of Legacy is service” – so runs the Charter, and that was Savige’s Creed. By virtue of his attainments he was called upon to take a prominent part in the administration of Legacy, first within his own Club and later, as Chairman of the Co-ordinating Council of Legacy in Australia. But always it was the essentially human character of the work which enthralled and upheld him, and the tasks which gave him most joy were those which brought him into close personal contact with the youngsters and their home life. Like their elders they recognised his goodwill and his leadership and responded to it. It was Savige who made possible the first camps held for the boys and girls by Melbourne, his own Club. These were erected on his own seaside property, and were originally conducted under his personal direction and largely with the aid of funds he had collected. There was hardly an important post in his own Club that Savige did not at some time occupy and adorn. He was happiest in the company of those men with whom he had served in the field, and cherished always the comradeship born of active service which is the essence of Legacy.

He was a man of strong convictions but attentive always to another’s point of view. As a Legatee he played a leading part in bringing hope and encouragement to many a mother on whom the whole responsibility of a young family had been suddenly and tragically laid; in the attainment of the ambitions of many an orphan child, which not so long since had seemed to him or to her to be mere dreams, impossible of realisation. Comfort for the bereaved, new hope for the children’s physical and educational welfare, assistance with the home, aid for the sick, money for the needy and a new courage to face a future that hitherto had held no promise, all these facets of our present endeavour combine to present a living and enduring memorial to the man who held together the little band which was Legacy’s beginning.

Between the two World Wars in addition to establishing himself successfully in civilian life and answering the constant calls of Legacy on his energy and time, Savige maintained an active association with the Army. He was convinced that a Second AIF would one day be urgently called upon, and as a Battalion Commander he spared no effort to train the Officers under his charge during the uneasy years of peace for the trial that he felt must come

These men have all subsequently had distinguished military careers, their names are well known and many of them serve in Legacy today. When the second crisis came, Savige himself was one of the first to offer, although his youth was spent, he proudly carried the number VX13 throughout the terrible years that followed. This time he was to command, first the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade in the first action of the Second AIF against the enemy at Bardia, and subsequently at Tobruk and Derna – all famous names now. It was his patrols which gave the warning – unheeded at the time – that Rommel’s reinforcements were reaching North Africa far earlier than was expected. Then followed the grim days of Greece and Crete when the fine qualities of his leadership were put to the uttermost test. I have been told by those closest to him, it was typical of Savige that when his convoys were on the move back and were being blasted from the air by unopposed Liftwaffe he should sit by the side of the open road, wearing his red banded cap, to steady the moreale of men who had then no chance of hitting back at the enemy.

Unorthodox no doubt, but here was a man indeed. Throughout the whole campaign and later when he commanded the 3rd division in New Guinea, and later still when with the ran of Lieutenant-General he became Corps Commander in New Guinea and Bougainville, it was at all times characteristic of him that he should see for himself the situation in the forward areas. He dealt personally with his sub-ordinate commanders whenever it was possible to do so. No one, says his G.1., understood better than he did the importance of front line troops seeing their G.O.C. frequently, and knowing that he was aware of, and prepared to share, their hardships and dangers. He took many risks that he should not have taken, exhausted himself physically and mentally times without number, and considered himself not at all in order to secure the success of his operations. Finally in Bougainville, he brought his campaign to a victorious conclusion and accepted the personal surrender of the Japanese Commander.

Savige is known as one of Australia’s most human military leaders, but let no one believe that he did not ask, and receive, the utmost of his men. He trained them in a hard school but he was ever conscious of their needs and observant and thoughtful of their welfare. Fearless and untiring under conditions which brought younger men down, he asked nothing that he was not himself prepared to give and do.

The close of the Second World War left him with the same brave heart, but a vitality greatly impaired. He was called upon again and again to perform important national tasks, notably that of Co-ordinator of Demobilisation and Dispersal. But his interest in Legacy never flagged – it was, in fact, more personal than ever, for under his command many Junior Legatees, sons of former comrades had proved themselves worthy of their Fathers in War and in peace. In the bearing and achievements of the young men of the Second AIF he took a particular and justifiable pride. He applied himself to the Extension of Legacy to areas in Victoria, where it had not been practicable to operate His record of service and close personal contact with the men of both wars made him a most welcome pioneer, and many new Clubs and Groups resulted from his efforts. He founded, and I doubt whether any one else could have done so, the Club in the great Capital of our Empire. His reputation and obvious sincerity surmounted obstacles that might well have daunted lesser men. Legacy’s debt to him visibly increased. But he was ever a simple man, with a great love and understanding of his fellow men, and a true Legatee at heart. Much that he did will never be known or recognised, save by those who benefitted. His service in Legacy ranged from the humble kitchen of cottage and farm to our representation in Westminster Abbey itself in the Coronation year. A knighthood set the seal upon an outstanding career. None the less when upon the death of Field Marhsall Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Savige became the Patron of the Melbourne Club, he retained at his own express desire, the title of Legatee Savige, and when on that final day we bade him farewell, when the flags he had served so faithfully were lowered, and the guns which had formed a grim background to so many of his years, crashed out in their final salute, it was apparent to all who had eyes to see that this great and simple man had won such a place in the hearts and affection of his fellow countrymen as is given to few men indeed. From the packed Cathedral, escorted by his fellow Generals, borne and followed by men of his own Units, by Legatees, and a great company of others who had cause to honour and esteem him, he made his last journey.

But that is not the end. His voice and presence are lost to us but his memory and inspiration must ever remain. As he has bequeathed to the National War Memorial yonder his diaries, records and battle plans, so he has bequeathed to us, his fellow Legatees, his share and his trust in Legacy itself. Never was the Torch passed by worthier hands. Ours it is to hold it high. Whatever material memorial the future may hold for him, Legacy owes this great Legatee a livelier recompense. It is within our power to implement what I believe to be his greatest wish, that Legacy and its ideal of comradeship and service shall flourish and endure. Let each one of us then resolve that we shall, within our several Clubs, in all tasks to which we are assigned, both great and small, keep in our minds the life and spirit of Stanley George Savige, so that his inspiration may uphold us in our endeavours, so that we may be proud at all times to say of Legacy to those who follow after –

“If you would see his memorial – look around you”.