

FOUNDATION DAY ADDRESS - MELBOURNE LEGACY

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THE OTHER SIDE OF LEGATEE STAN SAVIGE – LEGACY THEN AND NOW

During my Presidency I had the privilege of unveiling the Memorial to the founder of Legacy, Sir Stanley Savige, at Morwell on the 31st August 2006 and I went again to the dedication of Legacy Place, Morwell.

At this stage I would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Mr. Gaby Kiwarkis, Assyrian Levies, President, himself a veteran who served with 5/7 RAR in Iraq. I would like to take you through a journey of one particular event that Stanley Savige was involved in during WW1 and his subsequent return to Australia with the establishment of Legacy.

While unveiling this memorial I discovered that there was more to this great man than many people, including some Legatees, realised. I learned that he was a man who was held in awe by the Assyrian community, so much so that he has been credited with saving the entire Assyrian race and culture from extermination. Many of you already know of the service of Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savige, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O., M.C., and E.D. during World Wars 1 & 2.

He was commissioned at Lone Pine and commanded one of the battalion's rearguard parties during the famous evacuation.

While serving in France he was awarded the Military Cross. It is the service of Captain Stanley Savige during 1918 in the Middle East on which I would like to focus. It is due to this part of his service that we come to realise that we could not have wanted for a better person to establish this fine organisation called Legacy.

You will come to understand by this piece of history the qualities, compassion and leadership of the man who founded Legacy. Have we retained the same compassion today as was shown so many years ago by our founding Legatees? This is for you to decide.

Early in 1918 Captain Savige was selected to join a small band of Officers and NCO's from the British and Dominion Forces – these soldiers were most carefully selected for individual courage and proven qualities in leadership. They were to be sent to Persia, under the command of Major General Dunsterville. They would be later known as 'Dunsterforce', their role was to assist and mobilise the friendly tribes with a view to protecting the road to India, the Assyrians being one of those tribes.

The Assyrian defenders were being attacked on both the North and the South West, it was arranged that the Northern front would be held firmly by the Urmia battalion. All was going well; however the Assyrians were running out of ammunition and were being overrun by the Turks.

At the same time a detachment under the command of Captain Savige was carrying 45,000 pounds in Persian silver, 12 Lewis Guns and 100,000 rounds of ammunition. Savige's party was escorted by the Royal 14th Hussars, under Colonel Bridges. The detachment was ordered to halt 100 miles south of Urmia at Sain Kala. At Sain Kala there was no word of the Assyrians. Two days later, still no word. Colonel Bridges, complaining that his horses were running low on grain, he made the decision to withdraw. To Captain Savige's party, this decision caused intense disappointment, and its officers mostly Australian and New Zealanders, volunteered to the last man to get through, take Urmia and meet the Assyrians.

They suggested that Colonel Bridges need not accompany them. Savige later wrote, "I thought we were not giving them a chance". The proposal was not approved. They were ordered to withdraw. Colonel Bridges was content with leaving the Assyrians to their fate. Captain Savige it seems was of a different caliber, he was determined to reach them. After several attempts he secured permission to halt his unit fifty miles to the rear of Takan Tepe, with the intention of raising a local force and riding to Urmia.

Meanwhile the Assyrians at Urmia were now out of ammunition. The front began to waiver. The Turks seized the opportunity and attacked in force driving the Assyrians south towards the British lines. They retreated with all their families and livestock. The heat in late summer was unbearable; the procession had barely started when they were attacked on all sides by the Turks, Persians and Kurds.

Captain Savige pushed on to meet up with the Assyrian Army and resupply them with much needed ammunition and supplies. To his surprise, instead of finding an army to re-supply he found a huge contingent of refugees fleeing the Turkish Army.

What Savige was supposed to do was to return – he had the ammunition and money and was ordered not to let this fall into enemy hands. But he made an extraordinary decision at the time; and it is believed that only Captain Savige could have done it. The Assyrians weren't surprised to find that Captain Savige was an Australian and an ANZAC. He decided that all the ammunition and that money he was carrying wasn't worth the lives of those refugees. He decided, on his own initiative, to protect them.

There were only about twelve men. He left half guarding supplies and took six with him, and from that time he defended the refugees. He actually saved them. They were out of ammunition. Their rifles were useless. They had nowhere to go. They were starving, attacked mercilessly from every side; men, women and children, they were leaving non alive. It was wholesale massacre. Savige supplied them with the ammunition they needed; he made sure they had the food, he sent riders back to the British line informing them of the situation; he showed the refugees which direction to go, he then took up a defensive position at the rear of the refugees. This column was fifteen miles long; he rode with his six men all the way to the rear; he waited until the last possible moment, when he was practically surrounded, before he pulled out and then took up another defensive position.

He delayed the enemy in this way for about six weeks, until most of the refugees came down to the British lines.

In doing this Captain Savige risked his reputation and risked his life. Savige said in his memoirs that he placed himself between the Turks and the refugees. For this action Captain Savige was awarded a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) some seven months later. The official citation for his DSO reads:

“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during the retirement of refugees from Sain Keleh to Tikkan Tappah between 26th and 28th July 1918; also at Chalkaman on 5th and 6th August 1918. He was in command of a small

party sent to protect the rear of the column of refugees who were being hard-pressed by the enemy.

By his energy, resource, and able disposition, the hostile troops, many of whom were mounted, were kept at a distance, although in greatly superior force. He hung on to position after position until nearly surrounded, but on each occasion extricated his command most skillfully.

His cool determination and fine example under fire inspired his men and put heart into the almost panic stricken refugees, thereby averting what might have been a very serious situation."

The Assyrian community continues to hold the memory of Sir Stanley Savige in much high esteem to this day. It is interesting to draw parallels between the action of Captain Savige in 1918 and our current servicemen and women who have recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today in northern Iraq 96 years later there are the same similarities of a people being hounded and murdered.

What does this tell us about the man? He was compassionate, caring, strong of mind, he was a leader. This can be seen by the quality of the men he gathered around him when Legacy was in its infancy. He cared for the men under his command so it was not unexpected that when he returned to Australia he continued to care for these men and in particular the families who had lost the breadwinner, his men who died on the battle field.

Times were different then, the Legatees took on the personal sacrifice to care and look after those left behind. There was another war looming which took many of the Legatees away. When the Second World War ended, those who survived continued to take up that personal service as Legatees. Many other returned servicemen continued to establish Legacy Clubs throughout the country. By 1946 27 Legacy Clubs had been established. Many of these Legatees had served with the husbands of the widows. They took it on themselves to visit and provide support to the widows and their children, and it also included caring for the families of incapacitated veterans, as we now do today.

If Legatee Stan Savige were to return today, I wonder if he would be pleased with what he saw and if our Legatees were fulfilling the role of providing that personal service that commenced back in 1923.

A different time, the trauma the same, the need for support, a Legatee to talk to and share those difficult moments. Many of these returned men were looking for work, however the close bond of the battle field made many of these men feel it was their duty to fulfill the promise many made on the battle field.

I put it to you. Do you visit your widows, share a cup of tea or coffee, find out how they are getting along or listen to their stories and provide the support these widows seek; or do you believe your job is done when you complete an application for a War Widows Pension or enroll them into Legacy? For many widows they are left with a phone number and told "if you need anything just give me a call". For many it's the last time they receive a visit from their Legatee.

Only you will know how you deliver the Personal Service that keeps the flame alive.

Would you be able to stand in front of Legatee Stan Savige and say, "I care for my widows and their children, I subscribe to and uphold the Fundamentals of Legacy.

Thank you

(Legatee
Bill Rogers)