

**“Soldier & Saint: Lt Gen Sir Stanley Savige and the 50,000 Assyrians Saved”.
Speech to Legacy Victoria Comradeship Luncheon – 27 June 2023**

Good afternoon Legatees,

May I commence by firstly thanking Legacy and Dr Hugh Robertson for the generous invitation to join you at today’s comradeship luncheon. I’d also like to thank Peter Whelan, a constituent of my municipality, with whom I had a chance meeting 6 years ago that also helped instigate this talk.

When Dr Robertson asked me to identify the topic for my remarks today, I instinctively suggested, *“Soldier & Saint, Lt Gen Sir Stanley Savige and the 50,000 Assyrians Saved”*.

That I start with ‘Soldier’ is of course merely a matter of fact. Stan Savige is one of Australia’s most decorated soldiers though in my view, not nearly as well-known as he should be. Over and over, we find in historical records the words gallantry, devotion and humanity emerge in reference to this exemplary Australian.

Indeed, at his funeral with full military honours at St Paul’s Cathedral in 1954, the then Chaplain of the Southern Command and Bishop of Geelong, the Right Reverend Dr J.D. McKie, told the congregation that “Sir Stanely’s greatest virtue was humanity. He had great consideration for his troops. He thought that they were not there just to be used, but to be helped”.

These accolades in both life and death, will come as no surprise to you all assembled here. Though they may help explain the second term in the title, ‘Saint’; a term the context of which is usually associated with those who are recognised as having an exceptional degree of holiness, likeness or closeness to God.

You may be asking yourselves; what leads me to apply this lofty veneration to the boy from Morwell and how is it that many members of Australia’s Assyrian community feel the same way.

Well, my journey with Stan Savige commenced back on the 31st of August 2006, nearly 17-years-ago, when my father Jacob, a long-standing Assyrian community leader, asked me whether I wished to join him and other community leaders from Melbourne and Sydney at the Boorondara General Cemetery in Kew to commemorate an Australian general. I was told that this man, aged 28 in 1918 was credited for almost single-handedly saving 70,000 Assyrians from certain slaughter in Urmia region of north-west Persia during the Great War.

It is fair to say I had no idea who this man was or how he came to be indelibly connected to the modern history of the Assyrian Nation and to thousands of Assyrians.

For some in the room, you may not know much about the Assyrian people. Indeed, some in the room may never have heard of Assyrians.

The Assyrians are the indigenous people of northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, southeaster Turkey and eastern Syria. They are the descendants of the ancient Assyrian and Babylonian Empires which at its peak stretched from southern Iraq all the way to the Mediterranean coast at the peak of the civilisation's height in the 7th century. Assyrians speak Akkadian-influenced Aramaic or Syriac, one of the oldest continuously spoken languages and one of the oldest alphabetically written languages in the world. At its height Aramaic was the lingua franca of Western Asia and a language spoken by Jesus Christ. The Assyrian language, culture and identity is distinct and untelligable with Arabs, Kurds and Persians who inhabit the Middle East. Having converted as a nation to Christianity in the first century AD, Assyrians are almost exclusively Christian. Sadly, the vast majority of Assyrians have migrated outside of the Middle East and especially to Europe, North America and Australia as a result of WW1, the Iranian Revolution, Arab Nationalist policies in Iraq and Syria and more recently and egregiously due to the rise of the so called Islamic State who committed a modern genocide against the Assyrians in Iraq and Syria between 2014-17. Australia is home to more than 60,000 people of Assyrian ancestry residing almost entirely in western Sydney and Melbourne's northern suburbs.

It was these ancient people stuck in their hour of greatest desperation and in circumstances of immense horror who a young Captain Stan Savige and his small band of officers came across and for which their names are now etched in history. And while this great made had a great many adventures and experiences at Gallipoli, the Western Front, in Flanders and the Somme, it is only a period of some days and weeks in the summer of 1918 that I wish to share with you today.

Owing to talent that his superiors had seen in him, during that fateful summer of 1918, a young Captain Stan Savige had joined the 300-strong Allied 'Dunsterforce' unit named for its leader, Major General Lionel Dunsterville. Their job was to defend the overland routes to India from the Germans and their Ottoman allies in north-west Persia and to secure British colonial territories and assets in Central Asia and the Middle East.

On the 2nd of January 1918 he wrote to his young cousin Gracie: "[I] have been asked by General Smyth our commander if I would undertake a desperate venture which would probably cost my life but had a sporting chance. Nature of work and place unknown. Accepted."

This again gives us an insight into the character of the man; knowing the venture may cost his life but one he was willing to embrace.

After being assembled and sworn to their task at the Tower of London, the contingent set off by rail through France and then by ship through the Suez Canal finally landing in Barsa in British held Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). With no maps, in an area that had never been officially charted, Stan was sent further north to find existing guerilla forces who could be recruited along with just 23 men. Their task was also to re-supply Assyrians fighting with the Allies and lead by the Assyrian General Agha Petros in Persia.

During a patrol in August 1918 Savige and his comrades made physical contact with Assyrian forces just as the Urmia front collapsed and the survivors, a large convoy of Assyrian men, women and children began a 1000km trek through hostile territory to reach safety. They were actually fleeing the lakeside Assyrian city of Urmia in north-

western Persia. The area was the capital of the Azerbaijan province in northwest Persia where the borders of Turkey, Persia and Mesopotamia converged.

With the fall of Urmia to the Turkish forces and Kurdish irregulars, the Christian Assyrian people were in flight with thousands walking, many barefoot southwards over the mountain tracks to escape forces intent on destroying them.

Thousands of Assyrians raced down the mountains carrying everything they had; children and their chattels: animals, birds, chairs, rugs, pots, pans and tools; all rushing to escape.

In Savige's own account he says: 'Terror and despair were deeply written on their faces'.

Savige pleaded with British High Command to rescue the fleeing refugees which was refused.

The story goes that he either disobeyed British orders or received permission to go and rescue the column of souls.

The plan that he had suggested to the Assyrian General Agha Petros was [that]:

"I would take out with me two officers, six sergeants, three Lewis machine guns and sufficient food for six days. He was to collect and hand over to me one hundred men under the command of one of his chiefs, a man who was on the spot. On the assurance that he would have the men ready at dawn, we returned to our camp".

With just 8 Allied soldiers and a few Assyrian soldiers, Savige and his band pressed up against the tide of Assyrian refugees for mile after mile. They were greeted as angels. He wrote:

"The men would shout in tones of great joy, "the English, the English" and fired their rifles in the air with loud hurrahs. The unfortunate women folk were so overcome at the sight of the first party of the British that they wept aloud. Striking their breasts

they would call down upon us the blessings of God and rush across and kiss our hands and boots in joy”

It is here on the 4th or 5th of August 1918 at the edge of a village in a narrow valley that the force of 7 men engaged in fierce combat eventually repelling hundreds of Turkish soldiers and Kurdish irregulars. Also here, but a story for another day, is that of Captain Robert Kenneth Nicol MC, Wellington Regiment New Zealand, who attempted to assist Assyrian tribesmen recover ammunition when he met with heavy gunfire from Turkish positions and fell. His body was never to be recovered. In 2010 the Assyrian community of Australia and New Zealand also honoured Captain Nicol at the Trentham Military Camp in Wellington where plaques were unveiled at the memorial chapel.

After two days of not eating and having little to drink, Savage’s band was met by a small unit of British regulars and 50 Assyrian tribal mountaineers bringing the party into the British camp. They collapsed on the ground and fell asleep in exhaustion surrounded by Assyrian cavaliers and refugees.

Despite this after only a day’s rest, Savage decided to make a controlled evacuation of Assyrians from Sain Qaleh to the British headquarters at Hamadan British in batches of 800-1000 refugees.

During and after the 25 day exodus from Urmia, Savage used all the means at his disposal to protect the refugees from the perpetual onslaught.

Incredibly, he placed his command at the rear of the refugee column and deliberately drew fire from the enemy reasoning that they would concentrate on killing him before harming the refugees further.

He and other Dunsterforce officers rode at the back of the column for up to 15 hours without rest constantly drawing fire to himself.

Assyrians tell stories of Savage putting women who could not walk on his own horse.

Despite being outnumbered 100 to 1, Savige managed to slow the opposition advance long enough for most of the refugees to flee.

Around the 8th of August the refugee convoy made it through the Zagros Mountain gorges into the open countryside after which there were no further raids by the Kurdish mountaineers. The British Intelligence Office reported that 60,000 had eventually arrived at Hamedan.

It was here that despite his exhaustion, Savige showed what he was made of; drawing up the triage camp at Takkan Teppah where he worked furiously to get the refugee camp ready, buying corn and flour in local markets, procuring mules and equipment for local farmers and sending for doctors and medical staff.

Stragglers dragged themselves haphazardly into the refugee camp during the ensuing days; invariably Savige found them starving and often without a stitch of clothing.

One morning, as Captain Savige organised the camp stoves and provisions, he noticed two young Assyrian girls approaching the canteen for something to eat. They stood at the door in silence, completely naked. Both girls had bullet wounds in their backs and shoulders and were in a great deal of pain. They had been shot by Kurds during a night raid and their wounds had become infested with maggots.

Captain Savige searched around for something to cover the girls, wrapping them in long cotton army tunics. Next he attended their injuries, tearing up his shirt tails to bandage them.

During this journey 30,000 died or were missing never to be heard of again.

After all of this, Savige nearly died of exhaustion and ill health (having also been gased in the Western front). At Hamadan, Savige wrote to his young cousin Gracie:

“I have not been able to write for some time, as I have been out on the roads. We were sent out on a special mission, of those which did not come off. We were let in

for one of those awful things. A nation in flight. I cannot go into the details of that awful time. Imagine 60,000-80,000 people with all their earthly belongings on the road harassed by Turks and Kurds. Women and children being slaughtered, others dying from starvation and exhaustion.

I went out with a small party to try to prevent this murdering and to a large extent was successful, but it meant some hard and dangerous fighting.”

While the Assyrians met with relative safety upon their arrival in Hamedan, their journey was not over. They then walked 600kms further for three and a half weeks down into Baqubah, a refugee camp established by the British on the upper reaches of the Tigris River near Baghdad. By November 1918, 48,927 Assyrians had arrived.

For the Assyrians, this arrival marked the beginning of another century of heinous persecution and oppression the details of which it would take many hours for me to cover. The Assyrian hopes for a national homeland (and indeed British promises to deliver one) were dashed at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and in subsequent post-war fora.

It is interesting that Savage in his dispatch after all this referred to the Assyrians as ‘A nation in flight.’ For entirely devastating reasons these words were not only a reflection of that sad exodus but prophetic as to what the next century would hold. These circumstances are why Assyrians today are found in places like Melbourne and Sydney and not in the rugged mountains, plains and valleys of the homeland in which Savage met and saved them.

On his homeward journey, Savage was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order for his part in Dunsterforce. The citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during the retirement of refugees from Sain Qaleh to Tikkan Tappah between the 26th and 28th July 1918 also at Chalkaman on 5th and 6th August, 1918. In command of a small party sent to protect the rear of the column of refugees, he by his energy, resource, and able dispositions the hostile troops, many of whom were mounted were kept at a distance although in

greatly superior force. He hung onto position after position until nearly surrounded, and on each occasion extricated his command most skilfully. His cool determination and fine example under fire inspired his men, and put heart into the panic of the stricken refugees”.

Charles Bean, Australia’s most influential war correspondent recounted the following in his official history of the Great War:

“The stand made by Savige and his eight companions that evening and during half of the next day against hundreds of the enemy thirsting like wolves to get at the defenceless throng was as fine as any episode known to the present writer in the history of this war.”

When Savige regained consciousness after months of medical recuperation, it was just before Armistice in November 1918 and he realised the war was over.

Dear friends, in all this, we see the valour of a junior officer just 28 years of age. To recount in fullness the various acts of gallantry and greatness of Stan Savige would take days.

Not only did this man and a small group of Allied soldiers save one life, they saved a nation.

Today I have the great privilege of serving the people of Hume City in Melbourne’s north-western suburbs as Mayor. It is here that I represent a proudly diverse community and the second-largest community of Assyrians in Australia (numbering more than 20,000 people). Very many of these people would simply not be alive today were it not for a young Australian named Stan Savige. Another interesting connection is that it is in the very City that I now serve as Mayor that Stan Savige came in March 1915 to received AIF training at Broadmeadows (this is now known as Maygar Barracks home to the 4th Combat Service Support Battalion).

Much more could of course be said about this great man and the 100-year bond that exists between the Australian people and the ANZACs but we do not have the time for it today.

While those in this room may know Stan Savige as the founder of Legacy and as a distinguished Australian soldier, for those 60,000 souls he became much more; the saviour of the Assyrian people. A soldier, yes, but also a saint.

Thank you.