

# The Right Man for the Right Job: Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savage as a Military Commander

Gavin Keating

Reviewed by Dr John Connor

Of all the historical genres, biography is the hardest to write well. The biggest challenge for the biographer being the proper placement of the biographical subject in the context of his or her time. If authors do not provide enough historical background their subjects, as British historian Norman Gash suggests, become 'larger than life because they are shown on a strangely empty stage'. On the other hand, if the subject is submerged by too much historical detail and disappears from the book for pages at a time, then, as Lincoln biographer Stephen B. Oates warns, there is too much of the 'times' and not enough of the 'life'.

Gavin Keating has avoided this and many other pitfalls of biography to produce an excellent study of Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savage as a military commander. What makes this achievement even more remarkable is that this is the author's first book. Keating is an infantry officer in the Australian Army who has been deployed on operations in East Timor, Bougainville and the Middle East. This book fills an important gap in Australian military history: Savage had been the subject of W.B. Russell's *There Goes a Man* published in 1959, but that uncritical work was more hagiography than biography.

Born in Victoria in 1890, Savage enlisted in the AIF in 1915 and was commissioned at Gallipoli. After serving on the Western Front, where he was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Second Battle of Bullecourt, Savage volunteered for service in Persia (now Iran) with Dunsterforce. This special unit, commanded by a British officer, Major General L.C. Dunsterville, was tasked with opposing the Germans and Turks, gathering intelligence on Bolshevik attempts to spread communist revolution to India, and increasing British influence in Persia. Dunsterforce found itself in a chaotic situation and was forced to withdraw. Savage was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for providing protection to Assyrian and Armenian refugees fleeing the Turkish Army. As Keating rightly comments: 'Extreme distances, harsh terrain, poor infrastructure, the shifting loyalties of the local populations, language and cultural barriers, disease, famine and generally inadequate resources made military operations for Western forces in the region prohibitively difficult, much as they continue to do today.'

With the outbreak of World War II, Savage was appointed to command the 17th Brigade. The brigade fought in Libya and in Greece, and Savage and the brigade headquarters directed a portion of the 7th Division during the Syrian campaign. In 1941, Savage returned to Australia to take control of the 3rd Division which he led during the Salamaua

campaign. After this, Savage took command of New Guinea Force and finally II Corps, which he led until the end of the war in Bougainville.

This book tells Savage's life story, but it also goes beyond this to make three important contributions to Australian military history. The first is Keating's study of the importance of patronage in the Australian Army in this period. Savage

had become close friends with Blamey after World War I when the two frequented the Naval and Military Club in Melbourne. In fact, Savage provided the alibi for Blamey when his police badge was found in a brothel during a police raid. Keating argues that Blamey's patronage played a vital role in Savage's World War II career, especially in his promotion to command New Guinea Force in 1944.

The second contribution is an analysis of Savage's role in the internecine struggle between militia and staff corps officers in this period. Savage held the militia prejudice against the staff corps, but, as Keating points out, this did not stop him taking their advice during operations.

The third contribution is Keating's clear-eyed assessment of Savage as a military commander. Savage was an instinctive leader. His rapport with the men under his command and his sincere concern for their well-being – characteristics seen during both his army career and his work with Legacy – meant he was able to create 'the "atmosphere" required for effective command'. Savage was politically astute and was 'the right man for the right job' during the Bougainville campaign. He understood the need to limit Australian casualties and put a brake on the actions of his overly-aggressive junior commanders. However, Keating goes on to point out that Savage had a limited understanding of the technical issues involved in World War II combat. This made Savage overly-reliant on his staff officers. Keating argues convincingly that Savage's relative failure at Bardia and relative success in his later campaigns can be linked directly to the level of advice he received from his staff officers in each of these operations.

As a study of an important Australian general placed firmly in his historical context, Keating's *The Right Man for the Right Job*, can be recommended to anyone with an interest in Australian military history. ♦

Gavin Keating, *The Right Man for the Right Job: Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Savage as a Military Commander*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2005, Casebound and jacketed, 216pp., RRP \$A59.95.

