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978-0-521-76685-2 - The Architect of Victory: The Military Career of Lieutenant-General

Sir Frank Horton Berryman

Peter J. Dean

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this book, *The Architect of Victory*, is an important metaphor for Frank Berryman's career achievements during the Second World War. An architect is not only a planner and a designer but also a project manager with oversight of the construction of buildings or structures. Architects provide the ideas and vision; they lay the foundations and direct the construction so that the desired outcomes are achieved. They are recognised as highly skilled professionals but, like many other professions, to those outside their own industry the nuances of their role are neither well known nor clearly understood. All too often their major contribution to the structure they helped to forge is also overlooked. More likely the name associated with the tower, bridge or cathedral that they have designed bears the name of the financier or project owner.

Arguably the public knows even less of what a professional staff officer does. Yet on one level they can be somewhat similar to an architect. Both are highly trained and skilled professionals. An operations staff officer, like Berryman, provides many of the ideas and much of the vision to the construction of an operation or campaign. Such officers lay out the plans and set the foundations on which these battles are to be fought. Yet rarely does history remember their deeds, roles or accomplishments. Instead we remember the names of the commanders – Major-General Iven Mackay at Bardia and Tobruk, or Generals Blamey, Herring, Savage, Vasey, Morshead and Wootten in the operations for the reconquest of New Guinea and the islands of the South-West Pacific. Few can recall

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that the ‘architect’ behind each of these victories was Lieutenant-General Frank H. Berryman, the Staff Corps officer charged with the planning and design of these operations.

Like all good professionals, Berryman was well schooled. His formal education as a staff officer was undertaken at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, and in England at the Artillery School, Woolwich, and Staff College, Camberley. He served his ‘apprenticeship’ during the First World War and in the interwar period. Using this solid professional foundation he went on during the war of 1939–45 to prove that he had a deft touch when it came to the design and development of military plans. Like all the best staff officers he proved himself bold but calculating, and talented at realising the quality and strengths of the tools available and making the best use of them in order to achieve victory.

In this capacity Berryman’s greatest contribution was in the design and construction of the operational plans that were the platform of Australia’s victories at Bardia and Tobruk and in the campaigns and operations of Australia’s Pacific War from late 1942 onwards. He also made a considerable contribution to the campaign in Syria as an artillery and brigade commander and in New Guinea as a corps commander. To those officers who served with Berryman during the war, and to those historians who have undertaken in-depth studies of the campaigns in which he was involved, he is a well-known and highly respected officer. To the public, though, he is an unknown figure, and it is high time his role and accomplishments were more widely understood.

APPROACH AND THEMES

With this book I hope to fill a glaring gap in the historiography by examining Frank Berryman’s military career. Berryman is the last of Australia’s corps commanders to receive a biography, and he did not write an autobiography. Yet his prominence does not stem from this appointment; rather this biography situates Berryman in the context of all the military operations in which he took part as well as discussing the importance of planning and logistics, the personalities of the Australian high command, the campaigns and battles of the Middle East and the Pacific, and the United States–Australian military relationship in the South West Pacific Area (SWPA). These events are looked at through the prism of Berryman’s experience and his role in determining these events. Thus this study is inherently sympathetic to Berryman, but I hope without undue

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bias, for there is much to be critical of in Frank Berryman, not least his reputation as ‘Berry the Bastard’, and this aspect of his career, along with the more positive aspects of his personality and achievements, will be examined.

Not surprisingly, this book takes a biographical approach and, while it is not strictly speaking a traditional biography, it is nonetheless part of the orthodox military history tradition. Military biography is different from traditional biography in that ‘an assessment of outcomes cannot be ignored and for that reason . . . [it] is primarily concerned with evaluating and judging performance . . . unlike all other professions except medicine, the profession of arms requires its practitioners to be successful on every occasion when put to the test.’¹ This statement serves to highlight one of the essential cores of this work. In order to evaluate and judge the performance of Berryman it is vital to research the battles and campaigns in which he fought. Thus Berryman’s life outside the military is covered only where it directly relates to his profession, and in order to assess him at the most critical stages of his career, this book is largely centred on his experiences in the Second World War.

In following this tradition this book will explore a number of broad themes. The first theme is centred on personality and the Australian high command. Personality is one of the key features that affects ‘leadership and command’, an essential factor in the study of any military officer. This study looks at personality on two levels: first, the development of Berryman’s personality and its influence on his achievements, or otherwise, as a senior officer and, second, the relationships that he developed among the officers who made up the Australian high command.

Patronage networks, personality clashes and military professionalism are critical to this study. One of the key areas of historical interest during the Second World War in Australia has been the supposed clash between professional Staff Corps officers like Berryman and part-time militia officers. Too often Berryman has been derided as one of the chief critics of the militia. As this study will show, this is a gross oversimplification. Rather what is much more important in a study of this type is the relationship between personalities, professionalism and performance on the battlefield, not an officer’s mode of service, militia or otherwise.

In revealing this and other aspects of his life, his private papers, held at the Australian War Memorial (AWM), have formed a solid basis for this book. In particular his letters and diaries provide an insight into his thoughts and actions. Yet Berryman’s personality means that very

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few of these accounts, particularly early in the Second World War, pay tribute to fellow officers or criticise them. When he actually does so, the weight of judgement is therefore more pronounced. This study has also greatly benefited from the family papers that have been kindly lent to me. These letters and notes round out the papers held in the AWM and, as they have not been previously published, they have allowed a number of previous historical judgements of Berryman's personality, character and performance to be critically reassessed.

The second theme of this work is the role of operational planning on Australian military operations. Berryman planned the first ever Australian army operation in the Second World War, the capture of Bardia, and he was the chief architect of the largest ever operation in the history of the Australian Army, Operation Postern. He also spent most of the war against the Japanese as the army's chief of operational planning. He emerges from the war as a staff officer *par excellence*, and as such this study will concentrate on this aspect of his career.

The third theme of this biography is Berryman's emergence as one of the army's most important officers as a result of his ability to forge a strong working relationship with the Americans. As Blamey's chief of staff Berryman spent considerable time in the Pacific working with his US counterparts at MacArthur's headquarters (General Headquarters; GHQ), which was a highly demanding and delicate position. This study will look closely at the relationships Berryman forged with MacArthur and the senior staff at GHQ and assess what influence he had on the development of joint operations with the Americans and his role in directing and influencing operations with the US military. His work in operational planning and his exceptionally valuable relationship with the Americans made Berryman one of the most important officers in the defeat of the Japanese in the SWPA and, behind Blamey, the most influential officer in the Australian Army during the Pacific War.

Although my focus is on Frank Berryman, this book also addresses larger themes in Australian military history. Berryman is just one representative of a large military system. This study therefore seeks to understand some of the broader issues that faced the Australian Army during the first half of the twentieth century. It looks specifically at the career of an officer of the Staff Corps, still a somewhat neglected group in Australian military historiography. It also looks at a number of campaigns and operations that have been generally overlooked in Australian military history. The initial operations of the Australian 6th Division at Bardia and Tobruk

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received international acclaim in 1941 but scant attention from Australian historians ever since.² Very few Australians realise that their Army fought a major campaign against the Vichy French in Syria, and most of their knowledge of the Pacific War begins and ends with the Kokoda Trail. As Berryman was involved in a large number of these battles it is hoped that this study will contribute to the broadening of knowledge of these often overlooked parts of Australia's history.

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PART



THE MAKING OF A
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CHAPTER

THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MILITARY CAREER 1894–1915

When one visualises Frank Berryman, the image of an Anzac does not readily come to mind. His background did not lend itself to the idealised image of the Australian Digger. At 5 feet 7 inches and only 10 stone 7 lb he was neither tall nor powerful. Hardly the iconic image that the Australian Official Historian, C.E.W. Bean, had in mind when he spoke of that fine specimen of man who made up the First Australian Imperial Force (1st AIF). Furthermore, Berryman's upbringing in large towns and the suburbs of Melbourne did much to remove him from the 'bushman' stereotype that Bean was trying so hard to establish.¹

But what cemented Berryman's alienation from the Anzac mythology was the fact that he was both an officer and a professional soldier. His status stood in stark contrast to the amateur army and Diggers who made up the AIF. As the historian Jane Ross has argued, the 'myth' of the Digger failed to integrate the experience of the officer corps, and in particular it 'ignores the functions of the highest commanders and staff officers. It is indeed the myth of the fighting private.'² About the only thing that Frank Berryman seemed to have in common with the Anzac mystique was his humble working-class origins and his English heritage.

There was even less in Frank Berryman's background to suggest that he would become an officer and a gentleman in Australia's permanent military forces. Before 1913 the closest the family came to a military tradition was their name. 'Berryman' had developed from the word 'bury', which meant 'fortified town' in late old and Middle English.³

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Frank Berryman's English heritage harked back to his grandfather, John Berryman, an agricultural worker from Cornwall, who along with his wife Elizabeth emigrated to Geelong, Victoria, in March 1851.⁴ Frank's father, William Lee Berryman, a member of the Victorian railways in the locomotive branch, was John and Elizabeth's third son.⁵ The railway was, by all accounts, a very reputable occupation for a man of working-class origins. It gave respectable employment backed by a high degree of job security. It also provided William Lee with an opportunity to improve his social and financial standing by securing a trade.

By 1884 William was registered as an engine cleaner, and his work took him from Geelong West to Camperdown.⁶ During his time on the railways William met Annie Jane Horton, the daughter of Elizabeth Newton and Joseph Horton, a carpenter from East Collingwood,⁷ and they were married on 14 December 1887 at the bride's family home by the Reverend Fred Lockwood. Within a year William Lee had moved his new wife to Geelong. All their children – Emily Mabel (1888), Ada Florence (1890), Ethel Annie (1892), Frank Horton (1894), William Alfred (1896) and Raymond George (1898) – were born during the family's time in Geelong. Their first three children were girls, the last three boys and the last five children were all born almost exactly two years apart. Indeed March and April became busy months for celebration in the Berryman household with all except the eldest, Emily, having a birthday between 1 February and 11 April, an average of one birthday every ten days.⁸

As the family grew William Lee's work with the Victorian railways progressed steadily. He moved up to locomotive fireman in 1890, and by 1893 he was listed as an engine driver, his 'apprenticeship' completed.⁹ At the time their first son, Frank Horton, was born the family were living at Little Lywers Street in Geelong.¹⁰ They remained there until the railways took the Berryman family on a number of moves throughout Victoria. These relocations are easily traceable through the young Frank Berryman's school records. The first move was to Camperdown (1900–03), then back to Geelong (1903–06), to Port Melbourne (1906–07) and Carlton (1907).¹¹ It was not until 1908, when the railways sent William Lee to Box Hill, that the family were finally settled. For Frank Berryman these constant moves were a prelude to life in the army, with its incessant postings both interstate and overseas.

Unfortunately little of substance remains to reconstruct the early years of Frank Berryman's life. A quiet and reserved character, he spoke little to his friends and family about his childhood.¹² This lack of evidence is compounded by the deaths of his mother and father in the 1920s well

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before the birth of Frank Berryman's own children. The close links and bonds between grandchildren and grandparents that often allow family anecdotes to survive therefore had no opportunity to develop. This gap in the historical record is further compounded by the fact that none of William Lee's children kept a detailed record of their early lives. Nor did they pass on specific instances of oral memory to the family.¹³ The absence of evidence makes it almost impossible to form an authoritative insight into Frank Berryman's early thoughts and aspirations, philosophies or beliefs. The best indications of these can be found in reflections of his broader social, cultural and family experiences.

There are a number of clear influences upon the life of the young Frank Berryman. He grew up in a solidly working-class family, and his father's work for the railways would have enculturated the young Berryman into the views of the skilled nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Australian working class.

William Lee was involved in the 1903 Victorian railway strike, and the government's defeat of the Federal Locomotive Engine Drivers Union meant that when he was conditionally reinstated, along with other selected strikers, he received a 14.2 per cent pay cut for his trouble. It was to take another thirteen years before his pay was returned to pre-strike levels. The impact of the strike was felt for the next decade and also influenced a generation of the Berryman family. The strike was a sharp reminder to the Berryman family of the inherent insecurities of working-class life in the early twentieth century. It is reasonable to assume that the aspirations of Frank Berryman and his siblings were intensified by the experience and, while William remained committed to the cause of labour politics, he may well have pushed his sons towards middle-class occupations that were less reliant on the labour movement for their pay and conditions. Furthermore, despite Frank Berryman's political orientation moving firmly to the right of Australian politics as he got older, he maintained a considerable degree of sympathy for labour politics and an insight into the conditions of a working life.

In 1908 the settlement of the family at Box Hill finally allowed the Berrymans to establish meaningful roots in a community. The Berrymans had maintained their connections with the Methodist faith, which had been handed down from John and Elizabeth. William and his family became strong members of their local church community¹⁴ and, as for many families, Methodism was a defining influence on the Berrymans. The Methodist faith preached, beyond traditional Christian views, the ideas of reformation of the character and the transformation of society.

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Their conviction was that these principles were to be achieved through a liberal democratic system. This was complemented by a thirst for self-improvement and respectability. For strict Methodists this meant the adherence to ‘an austere moral code, keeping the Sabbath and eschewing dancing, gambling and drinking’.¹⁵ During their time at Box Hill, William Lee and his family were devoted members of the local Methodist community, and in time William Lee was a trustee of the church.¹⁶

The church’s values of a strong moral and personal code influenced the children’s upbringing, while William Lee’s support for the railways union and his involvement in community groups lent itself to the Methodist belief in broader social change. His commitment to the local community indicates his more holistic approach to his religious beliefs and his general value system. He was not only a trustee of the Box Hill Methodist church but also president of the bowling club and ‘an enthusiastic member of the Masonic club’.¹⁷ His contributions to the community over the last twenty years of his life were reflected in the ‘large funeral cortege’ that accompanied the coffin to his final resting place at Box Hill cemetery. This commitment to civic values was emulated by Frank and manifested itself throughout both his life and career.

During his formative years the major socialising forces in Frank’s life appear to have been grounded in the links between William Lee’s Methodism and his beliefs in working-class ideology. Frank Berryman also inherited a number of more subtle characteristics from his father. The parallels between father and son extend to the rigid, if not exhaustive, planning and organisational skills, his community focus and, in particular, his father’s passion for gardening. His mother, meanwhile, was to be one of a number of strong women in his life who provided the emotional and family foundation upon which Frank Berryman’s personal happiness and public success were to rely so heavily.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see the development of so many of Berryman’s personality traits as being derived from that most important of all socialisation agents, the family and its values and religion. Throughout his life and career it is easy to recognise the influence of family organisation and administration. His desire for self-improvement, respectability and the ideals of community improvement and charitable work all had an effect on his personality and career.

It was also during these early years that Berryman developed some of his less inspiring and less benevolent characteristics. Frank Berryman could be overly ambitious and critical of others, and he lacked both tact and patience with those whom he deemed to be less than above average