



Lieutenant General The Honourable SIR JOHN LAVARACK
KCMG, KCVO, KBE, CB, DSO

[1895 – 1957]



Sir John Lavarack was elected to Life Membership of the Club in 1957.

Sir John was Patron of the Club from 1947 to 1957

John Dudley Lavarack was born on 19 December 1885 in Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, the third child of English-born parents Cecil Wallace Lavarack, a draughtsman who became a major in the Queensland Defence Force, and his wife Jessie Helen, née Mackenzie. His father, then Captain Lavarack, was a Foundation member of the Club.

Educated at Brisbane Grammar School, Lavarack was a school cadet gaining high marks in the examination for a commission in the Permanent Military Forces. On 10 October 1912 Captain Lavarack married Sybil Nevett Ochiltree in Queenscliff.

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed. They are intended as casual reading for the benefit of Members, who are encouraged to advise of any inaccuracies in the material.

Please do not reproduce them or distribute them outside of the Club membership.

Honours and awards

For his First World War service Lavarack was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (1918), French Croix de Guerre (1919), Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (1919) and thrice Mentioned in Dispatches.

He was appointed Commander of the Order of the Bath (1937).

For his commands at Tobruk and in Syria Lavarack was appointed Knight Commander of the British Empire (1942) and Mentioned in Dispatches.

Military

In his post-war years, Lavarack was appointed Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in 1954, and Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George 1955.

On 7 August 1905 he was appointed lieutenant, Royal Australian Artillery with junior regimental postings in Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville, Thursday Island and Queenscliff, Victoria. He attended the Staff College, Camberley, England, from 1913 until the outbreak of World War I when he was seconded to the British Army. After working at the War Office, London, he was promoted and posted as brigade major of the 22nd (British) Divisional Artillery in February 1915. The division was sent to France and then Salonica, Greece. By May 1916 Major Lavarack was a staff officer of royal artillery in XVI Corps' headquarters.

In July 1916 he joined the 2nd (Australian) Division at Pozières, France. He commanded two field batteries and was brigade major of the 5th Divisional Artillery during the subsequent fighting on the Somme and advance to the Hindenburg line. One of the few Australian officers with staff-college training, he was transferred in May 1917 to Headquarters 1st Division. By December Lavarack was a lieutenant colonel and General Staff Officer Grade One of 4th Division, and took part in battles at Dernancourt (April 1918), Villers-Bretonneux (April), Hamel (July) and Amiens (August).

Returning to Australia in September 1919, Lavarack was posted to the Royal Military College (RMC) Duntroon, as Director of Military Art. In 1924 he then served on Headquarters 2nd Division, Sydney and in March 1925 was made Director of Military Training at Army Headquarters, Melbourne. Promoted brevet colonel in 1926, he went to London to attend the Imperial Defence College the next year, being the first Australian army officer to complete the course.

In 1929 Lavarack was given the post of Director of Military Operations and Intelligence at Army Headquarters where he engaged in keen debate with Shedden who was secretary of the Defence Committee. Shedden and the Naval Staff claimed that Australia's defence should rest on the Royal Navy while Lavarack, advisor to the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), argued that the Australian Army had to be prepared to deal with a possible invasion by Japan.

In 1933 Lavarack became commandant RMC before promotion to major general on 21 April 1935 (substantive in June) where he became CGS. Lavarack renewed his arguments with the Navy and Shedden and also challenged successive ministers for defence over the government's reliance on the Royal Navy and its insistence that army funds be spent on coastal defences rather than the field force. Lavarack found himself increasingly at odds with the government. Historians have debated Lavarack's approach to how he advised Government about the need to fund Army adequately in light of how their faith lay with the Royal Navy's capacity to keep Australia safe.

In 1938 the government appointed a British officer, Lieutenant General E. K. Squires, as inspector general of the Australian Military Forces. Lavarack worked closely with Squires to prepare the army for war before departing in May for a tour of Britain. He returned in September, after hostilities had begun to find Squires appointed CGS and Blamey selected to command the new 6th Division, AIF. Still out of favour with the government, Lavarack was promoted lieutenant general and given Southern Command. Blamey, his part time colleague, saw him as a potential rival, and used Lavarack's temperament as a justification for influencing the government to deny him important appointments.

The government raised the 7th Division in March 1940 and Blamey was appointed Corps commander, refusing Lavarack as commander 6th Division because of his 'defects of character'. Against Blamey's wishes, the government appointed Lavarack to command the 7th for which he reverted to major general. In March 1941 Axis forces attacked in Libya where 18th Brigade, 7th Division was rushed to Tobruk to support the 9th Australian Division already in defence. Lavarack was ordered to Tobruk in early April as head of Cyrenaica Command where he re-organized the defences, deploying Morshead's 9th division on the perimeter. On 13 and 14 April the garrison repelled a strong assault by Rommel's forces. Lavarack was to take over Western Desert Force, but Blamey, advising that Lavarack was unsuitable for high command intervened, leading to Lavarack returning to his 7th division in Egypt.

Lavarack and his remaining two brigades played a major role in the allied invasion of Syria in June 1941. He exercised effective leadership of the division which advanced in two columns, one on the coast and the other inland near Merdjayoun. In the midst of this campaign Lavarack was promoted (18 June) lieutenant general to command I Corps, replacing Blamey who had become deputy commander-in-chief in the Middle East. Lavarack took responsibility for conducting almost the whole of the Syrian campaign, supervising the capture of Damascus and Damour by a combined British, Indian, Australian and Free French force, ending the campaign on 12 July.

Following the Japanese attacks in the Far East, plans were made to deploy I Corps to the Far East. By late January 1942 Lavarack and his senior staff were in Java, ahead of the troops. Lavarack endeavoured to prevent the first of his units from being retained in Java but was unsuccessful in this effort. Fortunately the remainder were diverted to Australia and avoided capture, Lavarack arriving in Melbourne on 26 February 1942. In March he was acting Commander-in-Chief of the Australian Military Forces before Blamey assumed that appointment on his return from the Middle East. Next month Lavarack took command of the First Army, responsible for the defence of Queensland and New South Wales. His two years in this post were frustrating with Blamey overlooking him when an army commander was required in New Guinea.

In February 1944 Lavarack became head of the Australian Military Mission in Washington and then military adviser to the Australian delegation at the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco in April-June 1945. Lavarack became increasingly disappointed by his lack of active command, returning to Australia in August 1946 and retiring from the Army on 18 September.

Civilian

That month he was been appointed Governor of Queensland and sworn in on 1 October, the first Australian-born to hold the post. In 1951 his term was extended for another five years and then extended to 1 October 1957. Lavarack discharged his duties 'with a quiet and modest dignity' with a soldierly sense of duty, his friendly accessibility and desire to be of service to the people of Queensland. As Governor he held numerous patron and honorific appointments which come with that office.

Because of ill health he was relieved of his Governor's duties on 25 January 1957. He died on 4 December 1957 in his home at Buderim, Queensland and was accorded a state funeral and cremated. His wife, who had been president of the AIF Women's Association during World War II, survived him, as did his three sons, all of whom served in that war. In recognition of a life dedicated to service in the army and then as Governor, Lavarack Barracks at Townsville is named after him.



Sources included:

- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents