



## All Things Assyrian

### Captain Stanley Savige: the Man Who Saved the People of Assyria

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Myth, legend or unheralded hero - ceremonies in Melbourne and Morwell mark an Australian soldier whom some claim saved the entire Assyrian race and culture from extermination.

Sir Stanley Savige was an Australian Army officer decorated in both the First and Second World Wars; at home he was one of the key figures in the Legacy organisation - but for one group of people in Australia he's seen as something much more than that.

"The first time I heard of this story, it was from my grandfather, he was a First World War veteran, and I thought it was a fantastic story. Looking through the documents, through the archives... he was ordered the DSO for his services to the refugees, but his story was not written down," says Assyrian Levies president Gaby Kiwarkis of Morwell-born Captain Stanley Savige. He's talking of a story that has been passed down through generations of his descendants, but one which has not made headlines here in Australia.

First, however, Kiwarkis gives a background of who, exactly, the Assyrian people are descended from, and their place in world history.

"The Assyrian nation, you'd have to go back a fair way in time - about 3,000BC. They used to be prominent in Mesopotamia, what is now northern Iraq. They ruled the land there for about a thousand years, about 600BC the civilisation broke up, and the remnants gathered in the mountains, up until 1918, during the war," he says. It is here the fate of the Assyrian peoples became enmeshed in the events of the First World War; convinced by the Russians to join the fight with the Allies against Turkey, events conspired to bring them contact with one Captain Stanley Savige.

"From 1917, because of the Russian Revolution, the Russians pulled out, so that left the Assyrians isolated. A small allied nation stuck in the middle of nowhere, and they couldn't reach the British, and the British couldn't reach them. They were defeated in Turkey; they made their way further south and ended up in Persia, and that's when they first met the British column, and one of those British officers was Sir Stanley Savige," says Kiwarkis.

"[The Assyrian Army] was just about out of ammunition, they were holding on to a Persian city, fighting on their own for about eight months. They sent down a battalion to meet with the supply column, which was commanded by Captain Savige. When they met him... they started riding back to the city, were the Assyrians were. But in the meantime, the city was over-run by the Turks, and the entire nation... started moving south, towards the British lines.

"Halfway across, they met with Captain Savige. His job, you've got to remember, was to resupply the Assyrian army. There was no army left to resupply. What he was supposed to do was return - he had a lot of ammunition and money and was ordered not to let this equipment fall into enemy hands. But he made an extraordinary decision at that time; and I believe only Captain Savige would have done it. I wasn't surprised to find that Captain Savige was Australian and an ANZAC; he decided all that ammunition and that money he was carrying wasn't worth the lives of those refugees. He decided, on his own initiative, to protect them."

Savige's story echoes the defining characteristics of many Australian military legends; outnumbered,

outgunned, far from friendly faces and surviving on wits, bushcraft and tactics, Kiwarkis details the legend of the Australian who saved the Assyrian people.

"There were only about 12 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, children... they were leaving none alive. It was a wholesale massacre," he says. "He 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 them which direction to go, plus he took up defensive positions at the rear of the refugees. Now this column was about 15 miles long; he rode with his six men all the way to the rear... and 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 marched down to the British lines.

"He practically risked his career, risked his life - he said it himself in his memoirs that he placed himself between the Turks and refugees, he offered himself as a target so the Turkish commander would concentrate his men on trying to kill him, before the refugees... I mean, that's an amazing man..." asys Kiwarkis, explaining how this story has inspired him to unveil a memorial at the Boorondarra cemetery, and how the Australian-based Assyrian community has taken on Savige's role in their history.

In Morwell, Savige's hometown, the Assyrian community is gathering again to commemorate the man who might just have ensured their place in the 20th and 21st centuries.

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