

FREYBERG: BERNARD CYRIL

**VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO & 3 Bars
Legion of Merit Degree of Commander (from USA President Truman)**

Born: 21 March 1889, Richmond, England

Married: 14 Jun 1922, St Martha's Church, on St Martha's Hill, Surrey

To: Barbara McLaren (nee Jekyll)

Died: 4 July 1963, Windsor, England

Buried: St Martha's Church, on St Martha's Hill, Surrey, England

The Freyberg family tree goes back to Ivan Petrovich Freyberg (born c 1760) who escaped to England. His son Peter (Bernard's grandfather) married an English woman, Ann Elkins, & moved to England.

They had 8 children, of which Bernard's father James (1827 – 1914) was the 5th.

In 1852 James married Jane Wood (1828 – 1877) and had 5 children. In 1880 he married Julia Hamilton (1852 – 1936) and had 5 boys of whom Bernard was the youngest.

His four brothers were:

Oscar (1881 – 1915) Died at Gallipoli. Sub Lieutenant, KIA 6 Apr 1915: Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, Collingwood Battalion. Bernard was looking forward to catching up with him. However he was last seen alive in a Turkish trench with a pistol in each hand. His body was never found. He also served in the Boer War, along with Paul as private soldiers. He had not married.

Paul Milton (1883 – 1917) Died of wounds 18 June 1917. He was a rifleman in the 3 New Zealand (Rifle) Brigade, 4 Battalion. Again Bernard was looking forward to seeing his brother only to learn he had been mortally wounded at Messines. He had not married.

Cuthbert (1886 – 1973) WW 1 Gunner/Military, NZ Field Artillery. He also served on the Home Front in WW 2. From Electoral rolls he was described as a Civil Servant in Wellington, Auckland & Palmerston Nth. He was also a District Public Trustee in Hawera. His later life from about 1946 was in Keri Keri as a solicitor. He married Helen May Stuart Rathbone in 1921 and had two children, Peter & Sandy.

Claude Victor (1888 – 1963) He never married. From Electoral rolls he was described as a Bank Clerk, Clerk & Civil Servant, in Wellington.

James (the father) appears to have tried his hand at many different professions as between 1840 & 1880 he is described variously as a decorator, estate agent, auctioneer & surveyor. Early on during his 2nd marriage his finances took a turn for the worst and after a partner went bankrupt decided to move country. On 17 October 1891 the 2nd family embarked for New Zealand, arriving on the 2 December 1891. They lived in Hawker St, Mt Victoria, Wellington, until his father retired in 1908 & the family moved to Macdonald Cres.

James had virtually wiped his hands of his 1st family and the 2nd family never knew they existed for many years.

Both parents are buried at Karori cemetery, Wellington, New Zealand.

The five boys had a great outdoor life. They were homeschooled by their mother Julia until each became enrolled at Wellington College. Bernard started at the College in 1898 at the age of 9.

He did not excel academically and his life was dominated by his passion for swimming & yachting with his brothers. He gained the nickname "Tiny" as he was the youngest and smallest of a family of tall boys. It stayed with him his whole life.

In November 1905, at the age of 16, Bernard went to Australia to represent NZ in the Australasian swimming championships.

(From the period 1904 to 1911 he won 13 gold & 4 silver medals at NZ swimming Assn or NZ Championships from 100 yards to 1 mile races.)

He was the Club Captain of the Levin Swimming Assn in 1913 and in November 1917 he was made a Life member.

(In 1916 he was made a Life member of the Levin Club.)

In December 1904, Bernard abruptly left Wellington College, probably forced by his father – who was a bit of a martinet – to become an apprentice dentist. There were difficulties in obtaining registration. Finally, after much lobbying he completed his requirements in 1910 and was admitted to the Dentist's register in May 1911. There it remained until he requested it be deleted in 1936.

He left home & became an assistant & locum tenens in Morrinsville. He stayed a year and also managed a branch in Hamilton. He also was gazetted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the local territorial Unit.

He then moved to Levin and was employed in the surgery of Stuart Mackenzie. As well as swimming he played golf, tennis, roller-skated and rugby.

His rugby career whilst in Levin was for both the Wanderers & Kimberley clubs. He also played 2 games for Horowhenua in 1912 & one game in 1913.

(Papers Past articles show his name featuring several times both at club and representative level. He was also the goal kicker for his teams.)

In 1913 there occurred the dock & shipping strike. Bernard volunteered, along with his mates, to be a mounted special constable, although he had never ridden a horse before. One story to come out of this is that he lost control of his horse, which bolted into the mass of strikers. The picture of him hanging on for dear life was so hilarious that it broke up some of the tension.

(see the large photo on the North wall near the main entrance in Te Takere, which includes Tom Vincent, Hector McDonald, Bert Denton, Jack Bartholomew, Bernard Freyberg & Leslie Adkin)

The seamen remained on strike so Bernard again volunteered, this time to act as a stoker on the "Manganui" & did the Wellington to Sydney trip several times.

In 1914 Bernard decided to give up dentistry & see the world. He left NZ in March 1914. The next 5 months are not well recorded. However it is believed that he fought in the Mexican Civil war for 'Pancho' Villa. He then heard about the start of the war in Europe so left and made his way to either San Francisco or New York to get from there to England. When he left Mexico he had a price on his head. He also did not have much money so fought & won a couple of boxing matches as "Kid Comptomph".

He finally arrived in England in August 1914. He gained a commission in the Hood Battalion of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RND) as a temporary Lieutenant.

His exemplary service record as a soldier is dealt with at length in many publications.

This article is aimed at looking at his personal story within those military stories.

He won his 1st DSO at Gallipoli, when to save many casualties he volunteered to swim, by himself, to light flares on the shoreline, to distract the Turks. It took several hours, there & back plus the time on the beaches with the Turk's trenches very close.

Just prior to this Bernard was one of the party of 8 officers (who had shared their life with him) who dug the grave and buried the poet Rupert Brooke.

His 1st wound (abdominal) was suffered on the 7th May 1914, bad enough to be evacuated to Egypt.

(It was as result of this and the lack of treatment on the hospital ships that Freyberg made sure that in WW2 his troops always had – where possible - superior medical treatment available along with good food and clubs for the troops downtime.)

In July 1914 he suffered another stomach wound and was again evacuated.

In November 1916 he was back in the action with the RND at a place called **Ancre.**

This is where he won his VC.

The official citation is:

"For most conspicuous bravery & brilliant leading as a Battalion Commander.

For his splendid personal gallantry he carried the initial attack straight through the enemy's front system of trenches. Owing to mist & heavy fire of all descriptions, Lieutenant-Colonel Freyberg's command was much disorganised after the capture of his 1st objective. He personally rallied & reformed his men, including men from other units who had become intermixed.

He inspired all with his own contempt of danger. At the appointed time he led his men to the successful assault of the 2nd objective, many prisoners being captured.

During this advance he was twice wounded. He again rallied & re-formed all who were with him, & although unsupported in a very advanced position, he held his ground for the remainder of the day, & throughout the night, under heavy artillery & machine-gun fire. When reinforced on the following morning, he organised the attack on a strongly fortified village & showed a fine example of dash in personally leading the assault, capturing the village & 500 prisoners. In this operation he was again wounded.

Later in the afternoon, he was again wounded severely, but refused to leave the line till he had issued final instructions.

The personality, valour & utter contempt of danger on the part of this single officer enabled the lodgement in the most advanced objective of the Corps to be permanently held, & on this point d'appui the line was eventually formed."

In 1937 Bernard was declared medically unfit for general service. This affected him greatly and he fought against it in his own style.

In the meantime he was asked to meet with the Dep Prime Minister of NZ, Peter Fraser (who he had met through his pre war volunteer exploits).

Fraser and the NZ Government had done their homework and in November 1939 Major-General Freyberg was offered the appointment of General Officer Commanding the NZ Expeditionary Force. He accepted & agreed not to accept a Corps if offered one.

The irony was the general who was invalided out of the war was to experience five of the most strenuous & continuous years of active service of any general in the war.

The campaigns the 2NZEF were involved in have been detailed in many books. Suffice to say there were good & bad times. Greece, Crete, Tobruk, Minqar Qaim, Alam Halfa, Alamein.

It was after this that Churchill addressed the NZ Division and said " my friend of so many years of war & peace, the Salamander, as he may be called, of the British Empire, it was on those bare & rocky slopes to the south of Alamein where you were then preparing to receive what was expected to be a most dangerous & deadly thrust by the hitherto victorious Rommel..... "

Freyberg eventually included the Salamander on his coat of arms.

After the Middle East Freyberg flew to NZ to discuss future option with the Government & War Cabinet.

He was also feted at several receptions.

It was decided that the NZ Division they would stay in the European campaign & for him to continue to lead them.

Thus we come to the 1943/45 period where the 2 NZ Division fought at Sangro & Cassino, despite the fact that they had been training as a mobile division.

Finally they were able to use this training in the advance to Florence & the Lombardy Plain & the dash to Trieste.

After one particularly nasty accident, a plane crash, he received a large number of messages of sympathy, including one from Churchill, congratulating him on receiving his **19th wound**.

One quote from a German document, from 1945, captures the esteem of the NZ Division & Freyberg.

" The NZ'ers, most of whom volunteered for service in Europe out of sense of adventure, are trained & led by General Freyberg, a dangerous opponent. They are specialist in night fighting, they fight on a wide front & their method of attack resembles the German method. The NZer's have learnt to follow closely under the heavy artillery barrages which they use; by this means they are able to take their opponents off their guard & gain their objectives without heavy losses."

The last NZ troops left in July 1945.

Freyberg needed to spend time in England rearranging his personal affairs.

During this time he (along with others) received an honorary degree from Oxford. When it came time for his presentation the Public Orator could not resist making a pun (in Latin): ` "Monte" ubi parturiente, Libys sua fata novat "Mus" `.

The translation was "A mountain was in labour - & the Desert Rat reborn".

At this time he was offered the Governor-Generalship of NZ, which after talking it over with the family, he accepted.

They departed England on the 3 May 1946 on the "Ruahine", arriving in Wellington on 15 June 1946.

Over the next 6 years Bernard & Barbara travelled the country extensively, with Bernard making many speeches, sometimes several on the same day. They also made Vice Regal visits to the Pacific islands. There were also major engagements with the opening of Parliament, investitures and the celebration of the centenaries of various provinces. They entertained many overseas guests who stayed with them in Auckland & Wellington.

These years were described as some of his happiest. After the stresses & strains of the battlefield, Government House proved to be a very pleasant & agreeable existence.

(He even put a gate into the fence between Government House & Wellington College, & often popped through to talk to the boys from his old college. The gate is still there today.)

In 1951 the King approved the warrant for his peerage. It was 'of Wellington, New Zealand & of Munstead in the County of Surrey'.

Their time in NZ was extended as they expected a Royal tour. However despite lots of planning it did not take place because of the death of the King.

They finally left NZ on the 15 August 1952 where at the wharf there was a massive guard of honour from the RSA, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides & Wellington College boys. Also there to say goodbye was his two brothers Cuthbert & Claude plus the PM and Cabinet & Leader of the Opposition.

Bernard never saw his country again, however Barbara revisited in 1970.

Once back in England they turned their minds to fixing up their properties, and reconnecting with all their friends and their social activities. In addition Bernard attended , almost daily, Lords, the unveiling of many war memorials, as a director at the Bank of NZ & AMP and other duties he was asked to be involved in.

Eventually his health deteriorated and he collapsed with a ruptured abdominal aorta and he died in King Edward VII hospital at Windsor.

His funeral was held on the 10 July 1963, his coffin draped with the Union Jack & the New Zealand flag.

His son Paul describes his father:

"My father had stayed in harness to the very end as he had been determined to do, & he died after a full & busy day. His life had been one of adventure & action in many parts of the world, but eventually he returned home to lie in the quiet English churchyard of St Martha's, less then 20 miles from where he was born nearly three-quarters of a century before."

After his brother's Paul death at Messines, and at many other times, Bernard Freyberg quoted the lines from his friend Elsdon Best, the NZ Poet.

Today the lonely winds are loose
And crying goes the rain
While here we walk the field they knew
The dead who died in pain.
The fields that wait the slow hours long
For sounds that shall not come.
In other fields, in other earth
The laughing hearts are dumb.

Bernard's only son was Paul Richard Freyberg MC (1923 – 1993).

In World War II he served with the New Zealand Division in Greece, 1941 and the Long Range Desert Group in the Middle East 1941-42, then with the Grenadier Guards in Tunisia and Italy 1942-45. He was captured at Anzio, escaped into the Vatican and finally made his way back to England.

Postwar he was in the BAOR 1950-51 and other postings and the Ministry of Defence. He was commander of the Honourable Artillery Company, Infantry Battalion between 1965 and 1968.

Paul is the author of the (highly recommended) authorised biography of his father:

“Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations. ”

Paul succeeded his father as the 2nd Baron Freyberg.

Paul's son Valerian Bernard Freyberg (1970 -) is the current 3rd Baron Freyberg.