

## Sir Bernard Cyril Freyberg (1889-1963), an ennobled dentist and hero of the two World Wars

by  
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Sir Bernard Cyril Freyberg (1889-1963) in Cassino, Italy, January 3, 1944.

### *A top-level athlete*

Bernard Cyril Freyberg was born in London on May 21, 1889. He moved to New Zealand with his family at the age of two. He attended Wellington College from 1897 to 1904 where his sports feats were soon noticed. He excelled in swimming. He won the New Zealand 100-yards junior championship and the senior one five years later (Freyberg, 1991).

### *A qualified dentist*

Once graduated, he learnt dentistry and became the apprentice of J. S. Fairchild of Wellington. He gained formal registration as a dentist on May 22, 1911. He worked as an assistant dentist in Morrinsville for Dr A. L. Yule. He later practiced in Hamilton. On January 18, 1912, he rose to the rank of lieutenant in the Territorial Force unit of the Hauraki 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment which he left a month later when he accepted working as a dentist in Levin. However, in 1914, he left for San Francisco (Foster, 1966).

### *The British Army*

When the First World War broke out, he went to England and enrolled in the British army. He joined the 7th Hood Battalion of the Brigade Royal Marines. From September 1914, he was sent on the Belgian front. In April 1915, Freyberg became involved in the [Dardanelles campaign](#). During the night of April 14, 1915, Freyberg voluntarily swam ashore in the Gulf of Saros so as to distract the defending Turkish forces from the real landings taking place at Gallipoli. Despite coming under heavy fire, he returned safely from this outing, and he received the Distinguished Service Order for his feat. (Barber & Tonkin-Covell, 1989).

### *On the French territory*

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After the Gallipoli campaign, Freyberg was sent to France. On November 13, 1916, during the final stages of the Battle of the Somme, when he was in command of the 7th Hood Battalion, he so distinguished himself in the capture of Beaucourt village that he was awarded the Victoria Cross for “his exceptional bravery”.

After Freyberg’s battalion had carried the initial attack without success through the enemy’s trenches, he rallied his men and some others, and led them on a second assault which this time was a success. He suffered two wounds during the assault, but remained in command of his men that he led on the battlefield during two days in such a state. At the end of the second day, though wounded twice more, the second time severely, he refused to leave the line until he had issued final instructions (Freyberg, 1991).

### *A war hero*

The text of the citation was the following: “*The personality, the bravery and the scorn of danger of this officer enabled the position of the corps to be permanently held, and on this point the front line was eventually formed.*”

During his service in France, Freyberg received nine wounds. He continued to lead by example. At the end of the war, he gained promotion to the rank of temporary Brigadier and took command of a brigade in the 58th Division in April 1917, which made him the youngest general officer in the British Army. He was also awarded a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. At the end of the war, he was severely injured when a shell exploded at his feet. In January 1918, he commanded the 29th Division performing with distinction during the German offensive of March–April 1918. He won a bar to his DSO in tribute to his action. He received three of them.

At Lessines, he seized a bridge by leading a squadron, which was achieved few minutes before the armistice came into effect. Already nominated six times to the order of the army, he earned his second DSO (Barber & Tonkin-Covell, 1989).

### *In between two wars*

From 1921 to 1925, he was named officer at the headquarters of the 44<sup>th</sup> Division but he suffered health problems arising from his many wounds. In 1929, Freyberg was appointed to command the 1st Battalion of the Manchester Regiment. In 1934, he was promoted major-general at the age of 45.

While he seemed headed for the highest echelons of the army, heart problems obliged him to retire. He was declared unfit for active service in 1937 (Foster, 1966).

### *The New Zealand army*

In 1939, he approached the New Zealand government and offered his services. He became commander of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force and of the New Zealand 2nd Division. During the retreat in Greece in 1941, Freyberg commanded the Allied forces during the Battle of Crete and organized the withdrawal of the troops. Promoted to Lieutenant-General and Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Freyberg continued to command the New Zealand 2nd Division in North Africa and Italy.

Freyberg never got along and disagreed strongly with General Auchinleck. He refused and discussed some of his orders because, according to him, those orders ran counter to the New Zealand national interest. However, Freyberg enjoyed a good relationship with General Montgomery, who thought highly of the experienced New Zealander. Therefore, during the

Battle of El Alamein in October–November 1942, the New Zealand troops played a vital part in the Allies' final victory (Freyberg, 1991).

### *European campaign*

In 1944, he was part of the Allies' high command during the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. He was actually the one who ordered its bombings. The same year, he was seriously injured in an aircraft accident. After six weeks in hospital, he returned to command his men in the final moments of the war. When they had reached Trieste, having regulated a tense standoff with Yugoslav partisans, he earned a third bar to his DSO. He left his regiment on November 22, 1945 (Foster, 1966).

### *Governor-General of New Zealand*

Freyberg served as Governor-General of New Zealand from June 17, 1946 to August 15, 1952. In 1951, the Crown raised Freyberg to the peerage as Baron Freyberg of Wellington in New Zealand and of Munstead in the County of Surrey. After his term as New Zealand Governor-General had finished, Freyberg returned to England. Once there, he sat in the House of Lords. On March 1, 1953, he became the Deputy Constable and Lieutenant-Governor of Windsor Castle.

In 1955, Freyberg High School in Palmerston North, New Zealand opened. He died at Windsor on July 4, 1963 (Freyberg, 1991).

### *A salamander*

When he was a soldier, Freyberg became a legend. His men found him tremendous and were devoted to him, not only because he was living the same dangerous and uncomfortable battles, but also because he took great care of their well-being. He liked to be in the thick of action, so much so that Churchill called him "the Salamander" due to his love of fire as well as his indifference to danger, standing erect in the middle of the bullets blowing around him (Barber & Tonkin-Covell, 1989).

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