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Encyclopedia of New Zealand



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## FREYBERG, First Baron; Sir Bernard Cyril Freyberg, V.C., G.C.M.G., K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O. and three bars, K.St.J.

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(1889–1963).

Seventh Governor-General of New Zealand.

Bernard Cyril Freyberg was born in London on 21 March 1889 and was the son of James Freyberg and of his second wife, Julia *née* Hamilton, of an Argyllshire family. When he was two years old his parents emigrated to New Zealand, where his father joined the Public Service in Wellington as a surveyor. Freyberg was educated at Wellington College, where he became noted for his prowess at sports. He excelled at swimming and won the New Zealand junior swimming title in 1905 and the senior title five years later. When he left school he took up dentistry and, after training with J. S. Fairchild, of Wellington, acted as *locum tenens* for A. L. Yule in Morrinsville. While there he swam down the Waihou River from Te Aroha to Paeroa – a distance of about 14 miles. On 18 January 1912 he was gazetted as a Second Lieutenant in the 6th Hauraki Regiment (Territorials), but relinquished this a month later when he accepted a position at Levin where he remained, with one interruption – a trip to Australia as a stoker in the *Maunganui* – until early in 1914, when he went to San Francisco.

Immediately on the outbreak of the First World War Freyberg went to England and volunteered for service. G. S. Richardson arranged for him to join the 7th “Hood” Battalion of the Royal Naval Brigade, and he was on the Belgian front in September 1914. Rupert Brooke, the poet, was an officer in the 2nd “Anson” Battalion and he and Freyberg began a friendship which lasted until the

former's death at Lemnos. In April 1915 the Brigade was sent to the Dardanelles. There, on the night of 24 April 1915, Freyberg volunteered to swim ashore in the Gulf of Saros to divert the Turks' attention from the main landing. Although under heavy firing, he escaped unscathed and his successful exploit earned him his first D.S.O. After the Gallipoli campaign Freyberg was sent to France. On 13 November 1916, when he was in command of the "Hood" Battalion near Beaumont Hamel, he won the Victoria Cross "by his splendid personal gallantry". In the words of the official citation: "The personality, valour, and 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, and on this *point d'appui* the line was eventually formed". He was wounded four times in this engagement. When the war ended Freyberg was a Temporary Brigadier with the 29th Division. He had won the V.C., the D.S.O. and two bars, the C.M.G., was mentioned six times in dispatches, and had been wounded nine times.

After the war Freyberg attended the Staff College at Camberley. From 1929 to 1931 he commanded the 1st Battalion, Manchester Regiment, and he was Assistant Quartermaster-General, Southern Command (1931–33), before becoming a General Staff Officer (first class) at the War Office. He retired from the Army in 1934, but was recalled in September 1939 to become General Officer Commanding the Salisbury Plains Area. In November 1939 the New Zealand Government invited him to command the New Zealand Division in the Middle East. For a short time in 1941 he was Allied Commander-in-Chief in Crete and was responsible for evacuating the troops there. He led the New Zealand Division through the Greek, African, and Italian campaigns, winning a third bar to his D.S.O. in Italy in 1945.

On 17 June 1946 Freyberg succeeded Lord Newall as Governor-General of New Zealand. He held this office, having his term extended, until 15 August 1952. In 1951 he was elevated to the peerage and took the style "Baron Freyberg of Wellington, New Zealand and Munstead, Surrey".

From 1953 until his death Freyberg was Deputy Constable and Lieutenant-Governor of Windsor Castle. In addition to his military honours Freyberg was awarded the following honorary degrees: LL.D. (St. Andrews, 1922, and New Zealand, 1953) and D.C.L. (Oxford, 1945).

On 14 June 1922 Freyberg married Barbara, widow of the Hon. Francis Walter Stafford Maclaren, M.P., daughter of Sir Herbert Jekyll, K.C.M.G., of Munstead, Surrey. Freyberg died at Windsor on 4 July 1963 and was succeeded in his title by his only son.

As a soldier Freyberg became a legend in his own lifetime. Although his men thought him formidable, he won and retained their devotion, not only because he shared their dangers and discomforts but also because he was ever solicitous of their welfare. He would be found in the thick

of any battle in which his troops were engaged and his apparent indifference to danger led Sir Winston Churchill to describe him as a “Salamander” – because he seemed to thrive in fire. A war correspondent who met him during the African campaign has left the following pen portrait of Freyberg the General: “He is a big man, over 6 feet, built like a Rugby forward. He has keen eyes which he squints suspiciously, a broad, red, fleshy face, sharp, hard mouth, and a curious high-pitched voice”. During his period as Commander of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force, Freyberg won the confidence of the New Zealand Government and people to a remarkable degree and his choice as Governor-General was a popular one.

Although Freyberg's fame will inevitably rest upon his military career, two further facets of his life deserve passing mention. In 1922 he stood as Liberal candidate at the Cardiff-South parliamentary election. He polled second in the three-cornered contest, being defeated by the Conservative sitting member by 900 votes. During the war those privileged to read Freyberg's reports to the New Zealand Government were impressed by his fine style of writing and by his accurate and economical use of words. In 1933 Freyberg published *A Study of Unit Administration*, which became a staff college textbook on quarter-masters' logistics. In addition he wrote a book on wines, a subject on which he was an authority.

*by Bernard John Foster, M.A., Research Officer, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington.*

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