

New Zealand's Champion Swimmer Bernard Freyberg

One of the British Empire's "Most Fabulous Soldiers"

Born in London in 1880 and taken to New Zealand as a child, Bernard Freyberg was a strong swimmer, twice winning the national 100 meter championship in 1906 and 1910. Trained as a dental assistant, he dreamed of being a soldier. Denied a King's commission, he left New Zealand in 1914 to join Pancho Villa's revolutionary army and then lit out for London when WWI started. Stranded in Los Angeles, he earned fare to New York by winning a swimming meet. Stranded in New York, he earned fare to London by winning a prizefight. Unknown in London he accosted



ed Winston Churchill and demanded a commission, claiming to have been a captain in Villa's army.

Sent to Gallipoli, Freyberg literally earned himself immortality with a feat of personal bravery which Sir James "J. M." Barrie (best remembered today for penning Peter Pan) chose as an example for his classic essay, *Courage*.

Courage is the thing. All goes if courage goes. What says our glorious Johnson of courage: 'Unless a man has that virtue he has no security for preserving any other.' We should thank our Creator three times daily for courage instead of for our bread, which, if we work, is surely the one thing we have a right to claim of Him. This courage is a proof of our immortality, greater even than gardens 'when the eve is cool.' Pray for it. 'Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered.' Be not merely courageous, but light-hearted and gay. There is an officer who was the first of our Army to land at Gallipoli. He was dropped overboard to light decoys on the shore, so as to deceive the Turks as to where the landing was to be. He pushed a raft containing these in front of him. It was a frosty night, and he was naked and painted black. Firing from the ships was going on all around. It was a two-hours' swim in pitch darkness. He did it, crawled through the scrub to listen to the talk of the enemy, who were so near that he could have shaken hands with them, lit his decoys and swam back. He seems to look on this as a gay affair. He is a V.C. now, and you would not think to look at him that he could ever have presented such a disreputable appearance. Would you? (indicating Colonel Freyberg).



Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg, VC, Commanding the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (New Zealand Division, 2nd New Zealand Division) March, 1943, painting by Peter McIntyre, NZ National Collection of War Art.

The Turks rushed over to repulse what they thought was a big landing force while the British landed further down the peninsula. For this swimming feat, credited with saving thousands of British lives, Freyberg got the D.S.O. (Distinguished Service Order). Later in the same ill-fated campaign, he won the Victoria Cross for leading a charge, although wounded four times. After recovering from his wounds and already a living legend, Freyberg was promoted to Brigadier General in 1917.

After the war, Freyberg lived in England trying unsuccessfully to get elected to Commons and several times to swim the English Channel, once missing by only 400 yards. When WWII broke out in 1939, he was again a hero as commander of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

In the long and illustrious history of British Military heroes, swimmer Bernard Freyberg is one of the most fabulous.