

GREAT SWIMS IN OPEN WATER: SWIMMER RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF BRITISH MILITARY'S GREATEST HEROES

Bernard Freyberg, a New Zealander who distinguished himself both in swimming and in war, used his expertise in swimming to perform one of the most heroic acts of World War I.

BY **BRUCE WIGO AND PHILLIP WHITTEN**

PHOTOS BY **INTERNATIONAL SWIMMING HALL OF FAME**

Challenges. Everyone experiences them. They are, after all, an important part of life. But people react very differently to the challenges with which they are confronted.

Some people do everything they possibly can to avoid having to respond to life's challenges. They try to blend in with the scenery, making themselves as inconspicuous as possible in the hope that no one will see them and force them to react. Other folks take a sort of neutral approach: they don't go seeking challenges, but when confronted by them, respond as best they can.

But there's another, much smaller group of people who actively seek out challenges, who choose to do battle against other individuals, institutions, the natural elements or simply the state of civilization. These people look for challenges by which to test themselves.

Such a man was Bernard Freyberg.

EARLY YEARS

Born in London in 1889 and taken to New Zealand as a child, Bernard Cyril Freyberg was a strong swimmer, winning the junior national title in the 100 yard freestyle at the age of 15 and twice winning the national 100-meter championship. Although nicknamed "Tiny," he was six feet tall, broad chested and powerful in proportion. He trained at Te Aro Baths, an open-air saltwater pool at Oriental Bay, which would one day be replaced by the modernist waterfront landmark that now bears his name.

He worked in a variety of positions—from ship's stoker to dental assistant—but found these mundane occupations unchallenging. Craving for more excitement in his life, he set out for San Francisco in March of 1914. He joined the Olympic Club and was a member of the water polo team before heading to Mexico to join Pancho Villa's insurrection. He found he loved to fight, and when the war clouds burst over Europe, he returned to San Francisco only to find he had no way of getting to London to join the British armed forces.

Characteristically, he took it as a challenge. And characteristically, he met that challenge in a typically resourceful manner.

He heard about a professional swimming race to be held in the San Francisco Bay. He signed up and, yes, he won, earning enough money to travel to New York. There, he entered a professional boxing tournament at a Harlem fight club where he knocked out



>> **BERNARD FREYBERG WAS A STRONG SWIMMER IN HIS YOUTH, WINNING NATIONAL TITLES IN NEW ZEALAND. AFTER THE END OF WORLD WAR I, HE RETURNED TO THE WATER TO REHABILITATE HIS BODY AND ATTEMPTED TWO UNSUCCESSFUL ENGLISH CHANNEL CROSSINGS THAT WERE CUT SHORT DUE TO STRONG TIDES (1925) AND STRONG WINDS THAT KICKED UP A HEAVY SEA (1926).**

"Young McGuffy" and collected enough to book passage on the next steamer to London.

MILITARY CAREER

He managed to wangle an invitation to meet with Sir Winston Churchill, then Great Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty, and convinced Sir Winston to grant his request for a commission in the 63rd Royal Navy Division. Although "naval," it was actually an infantry battalion, and less than a month after his arrival in England, Freyberg was on the front lines fighting the Germans during the siege of Antwerp.

He distinguished himself in battle and was promoted in rank to lieutenant commander. When it became apparent that the Germans would take the city, the battalion withdrew by sea and was sent to the Aegean Sea in preparation for an amphibious assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula. If they were able to capture the forts or destroy the Ottoman artillery batteries, the British navy would have a clear

path through the Dardanelles to capture the Ottoman capital of Constantinople.

To create a diversion from the actual landing sites, Freyberg was to lead a small landing party on the beach at Bulair, many miles from where the landings would take place. But after considering the plan, he suggested an alternative, which he argued had an equal chance of success and would involve less loss of life if a failure.

His scheme was approved, and on the evening of April 24, 1915, Freyberg was aboard a destroyer a few miles off the coast of Bulair. He stripped off all of his clothes and camouflaged his face and body with black paint so it would not be visible even under the shine of flashlights. He was then lowered into the bitterly cold water, along with a raft loaded with flares. His plan was to swim the flares ashore, light them as if a landing was intended there, and swim back out to the waiting destroyer.

For two hours he swam silently, towing the raft until he reached the shore. From the deck of the destroyer, the crew could see the flares being lit, one after the other, and then waited anxiously for the "landing party" to return. But Freyberg wasn't content just to light the flares. He took it upon himself to ensure the plan was working, but as he was wading back into the water, he was discovered by the Turks, who started firing bullets wildly in his direction. The darkness that had protected him on his swim to shore was a friend again as he disappeared underwater, resurfaced to breathe, and dove underwater again until he was far enough offshore to feel safe.

Now the darkness turned against him. Strong swimmer that he was, even without the burden of the raft, the return trip proved to be his greatest challenge as he fought the strong currents while desperately searching for the outline of the destroyer. Finally, near total exhaustion, the hulk of the ship appeared before him, and he was plucked out of the water.

Freyberg's audacious action made the British landing at Suvia a complete surprise, but this operation was one of the few bright spots in the dismal failure of the Gallipoli campaign. While the fearless Kiwi was rewarded with a Distinguished Service Order (DSO) medal, the two sides were soon bogged down in a stalemate that resulted in the slaughter of more than 100,000 young men.

Following his heroics in the Gulf of Saros, Freyberg displayed his courage in numerous other campaigns where he was wounded nine times, earning a total of three DSOs, the Victoria Cross and the French Croix de Guerre.

OPEN WATER SWIMMER

After the War's end, "the most wounded veteran of the English army" returned to the water to rehabilitate his body, and in 1925, Lieutenant Colonel Freyberg announced his intention to swim across the English Channel. That he would try at all was amazing because he had been literally shot to pieces, and the vivid scars that covered his arms, legs, stomach and back told of his amazing wartime heroics.

Freyberg entered the water at Cap Gris-Nez at 8:25 p.m. on Aug. 4, 1925, and he came within 600 yards of the English coast at Point Hope before the tide turned against him. After fighting the tides and currents for 17 hours, he was half-a-mile off the shore at Kingsdown when his pilot told him it would be another four hours before the tides would be favorable again.

Realizing he could not last another four hours in the cold water, he abandoned his attempt, but his swim was the closest anyone came



>> SERVING IN BOTH WORLD WAR I AND II, BERNARD FREYBERG BECAME ONE OF THE MOST DECORATED SOLDIERS OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE. AFTER WORLD WAR II, HE CAPPED HIS MILITARY CAREER BY SERVING AS NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST GOVERNOR-GENERAL FROM 1946 TO 1952.

to crossing the Channel during the 1925 season, including Gertrude Ederle, who failed in her first attempt weeks later.

Freyberg made a second attempt in September of 1926, just a few weeks after Gertrude Ederle's triumph. This time he started from Cap Griz-Nez in the morning and made good progress until noon, when a strong wind kicked up a heavy sea. At times, the tug lost sight of him. After being in the water for 8-1/2 hours with cramps from the bitterly cold water, he discontinued his swim. Thus ended his career as a swimmer.

* * *

Bernard Freyberg combined courage, intelligence, bravery and outrageous audacity to become one of the most decorated British Empire soldiers in the entire war. He later served with great distinction in World War II, commanding ANZAC and Allied Forces in Greece and Africa, receiving additional decorations for bravery and military successes.

After World War II, Freyberg capped his career by serving as New Zealand's first governor-general from 1946 to 1952. He died from complications of war injuries in 1963. In the long and illustrious history of British Military heroes, swimmer Bernard Freyberg is one of the most fabulous. ❖

.....
Bruce Wigo, historian and senior consultant at the International Swimming Hall of Fame, served as president/CEO of ISHOF from 2005-17. Phillip Whitten served as editor-in-chief and chief media officer of Swimming World Magazine from 1992-2006.