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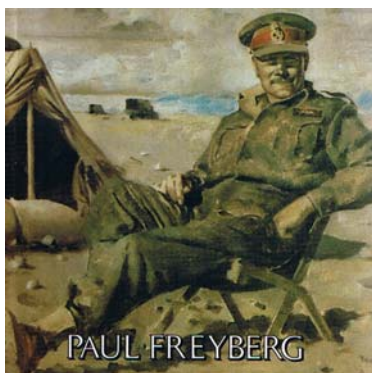
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BERNARD FREYBERG V.C. SOLDIER OF TWO NATIONS

This is the title of an enthralling and absorbing biography, recently added to the Trust's collection, written in 1991 with great sensitivity and in meticulous detail by his son, Paul. The connection is that Paul (2nd Baron Freyberg) was the late husband of Ivry, Lady Freyberg, Patron of the Trust, who had one grandmother and two great grandparents who were all Cobbolds.

It is a big book so any attempt to summarise would trivialise and is best avoided. The book recounts in great detail (some of it previously unpublished) Freyberg's participation in strategic and tactical decision making through two World Wars. Though intensely interesting and historically valuable this was not what attracted me. I found myself gripped by the unparalleled strength of character and personality of the man himself. It is well beyond my skill level to describe him myself so I have selected a few quotes from the book which will I hope illustrate what I mean.



Caption: Freyberg V.C. outside his tent in the Libyan desert c 1941 from a painting by Peter McIntyre, the official artist to the New Zealand forces.



Caption: Freyberg V.C. 1918 One of the youngest brigadier-generals in the British Army. Portrait by Ambrose McEvoy. (Courtesy, Imperial War Museum)

His V.C. was awarded 'For most conspicuous bravery and brilliant leading as a Battalion Commander.' The action in which it was won is described by General Sir Beauvoir de Lisle:

'At nightfall on the 13th after the most bloody casualties it was realised that the attack had failed again, but Lieutenant-Colonel Freyberg, though wounded, collected every man who had got through the left of the German defences. This party of about 350 he led during the night up the spur to attack Beaucourt redoubt. He took the redoubt and the remainder of the ridge, and next morning 5,000 Germans between this ridge and the Beaumont Hamel defences surrendered. By his initiative, fine leading and bravery Lieutenant-Colonel Freyberg won the battle of Ancre. Probably this was the most distinguished personal act in the war'

Chief Petty Officer Tobin who was close to Freyberg during the action said ‘...a giant in stature, as strong as an ox, brave as a lion, yet gentle, kind and [he] understood the men’s humour. He never talked down to them and didn’t expect them to talk up to him...They were proud of him and more than proud to call themselves Freyberg’s men’

When Freyberg took over command of 2 NZEF some of his men were at first fearful of his tall, well-built stature and his formidable reputation and appearance. Yet as General Stevens explains:

‘Nothing could have been further from the truth than those first beliefs. We found a man who was kind, considerate, gentle, compassionate, always ready to listen, always approachable. I never heard him raise his voice in anger, or say a harsh or unkind word...He was never peremptory, never curt, never dictatorial, never criticised anyone in front of anyone else, and if he did criticise one’s work, was so gentle about it that it was hard to realise that criticism was intended...There may be differences of opinion about Freyberg’s conduct of operations; but there are none at all about these personal characteristics. He was dignified under provocation or under rudeness, or when someone took advantage of his forbearance, for he was understanding and tolerant of human weaknesses. In a word he was simpleness and gentleness personified.’



Caption: Freyberg V.C. at Baggush with his son Paul, serving with the Long Range Desert Group, October 1941. (Author’s personal collection)

For some time prior to the event there had been suggestions that Freyberg should be offered a peerage and both the past and present Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and New Zealand, Churchill and Atlee, Fraser and Holland, had agreed that the appropriate moment would be towards the end of his time as Governor-General of New Zealand. Clement Atlee had written on 2nd May 1951:

'It would give me much pleasure to include your name in the list of recommendations which I shall submit to the King for the Birthday Honours. I have it in mind to recommend that the dignity of a Barony of the United Kingdom be conferred upon you, and I hope you will allow me to do so. When Mr Holland was over here in January, I took the opportunity of mentioning this proposal to him and he warmly concurred. Perhaps you will be so good as to let me have your reply by telegram.'



Caption: Churchill has a private word with Freyberg. February 1943. (Author's personal collection)

Freyberg died at Windsor on 4th July 1963. Sir Patrick Duff described his final journey for burial six days later:

'...a small party...set out to the spot...to which the young Colonel Freyberg V.C., in the full flush of his fame after the First World War, had led his bride-to-be, with a small bevy of friends including Sir J M Barrie and Arthur Asquith to be married in St Martha's Church on St Martha's Hill. It was deep in the country. Towards the journey's end, the lanes grew narrower and the hill steeper until cars could go no further. The party then went onwards on foot. The way lay uphill...with sand deep and loose under foot...the ground covered with pine needles and criss-crossed with gnarled roots. This track was the ancient Pilgrims' Way by which pilgrims went from Winchester to Canterbury. One of the party at least, a little out of breath and slipping on the pine needles could not help smiling to think how like the General it was to lead us by so exciting and arduous a route.'

Anthony Cobbold

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Bernard Freyberg, V C: soldier of two nations, published by Hodder and Stoughton 1991. The copyright of Paul Freyberg is acknowledged.