# British Establishment Nazis

## Foreword

## Freyberg VC – A Personal Journey

*A dishonourable alternative explanation of the Allies' failure to hold Crete: that the battle had been deliberately thrown and was in fact part of a staged and planned retreat.*

I never knew Bernard Freyberg, my famous New Zealand grandfather, a hero of both the First and the Second World War. He died a few weeks after I was born.

During his life he was portrayed in the press as the epitome of the legendary action hero and a great leader of men in battle. Since his death - and particularly during the last twenty to thirty years - his image has taken a huge knock and he is now perceived as an incompetent General. I wanted to reconcile the two very different views of him. The problems that I would inevitably encounter were the couple of blots on his record - I suppose given his career you could call them small blots - except they weren't small. They were the loss of the Battle of Crete and the controversial bombing of the monastery at Monte Cassino.

My image of him came from his actions, particularly in battle over a thirty or so year period,, and from the stories told by my father Paul. In his glory years - up until his retirement at Windsor Castle - he had been irrepressible, energetic and bounced back whatever the obstacles. Obstacles like being severely blown up or being invalided out of the army in 1937.[1] His position as poster boy for the all action hero was helped by the fact that he photographed well as he was good looking with wide-set eyes in an almost round face, balanced certainly in the early days by an athletic body. Bernard had been a swimming champion and photographs of him in a swimming costume can still be seen on the internet where he exudes unusual poise and confidence. From what I can gather he had an enviable happy temperament and sense of humour, balanced by keenness and intelligence - attributes which are now downplayed. In the later photographs, Bernard's soldierly appearance became more commanding and formidable.

His marriage to my grandmother had been very happy despite their very different backgrounds. Barbara was musical, cultured, politically liberal, well connected and comfortably off, whilst Bernard had little interest in music, literature or the arts generally, though the odd aside about his favourite picture (a Ford Maddox Brown Mother and child) or his purchase of Tang horses from a ship's barber revealed a slightly different side to him. Although Bernard's background was rarely mentioned, we did know that his elderly father had moved to New Zealand when Bernard was two (his father was 62) because of a financial crisis. His upbringing in blustery Wellington had been typical for children in New Zealand at the turn of the century: basic, healthy, outdoors, sporty and very hardy. I wondered if it was because of his outsider start in life, outsider in terms of the British Establishment, that his posthumous fall from his pedestal has been undefended.

[1] Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations* (1991), pp. 187, 199.

What I admired about him - apart from his courage - was his balance. He didn't seem to change whatever the circumstances and he coped enthusiastically with both kindness and tolerance to a variety of conditions. He appeared to delight in the people he came across - certainly the men whom were close to him, reciprocated his affection. One of his staff at the battle of Alamein said that Freyberg's technique of command with his senior NZ commanders was characterized by a degree of 'democracy', informality, mutual trust and admiration which made for success in command.[2]

His transition from an action hero in the First World War to an organizer with a keen eye for detail appeared effortless even if the work that went into it was immense. When he restored his connection with New Zealand by leading its army in the Second World War, he was able to include Barbara in the welfare work and clubs and as a result their friendship with so many New Zealanders continued to be personal and strong throughout their lives. Barbara's last trip to New Zealand to see all her friends had been in 1970 and I had gone to the docks with my father and sister Annabel to wave her off. And every year a deluge of Christmas cards arrived for her from New Zealand along with exotic treats like strawberries (they were exotic in the 1960s in December!).

Of course there had to be a downside. No one is perfect, but in his case I didn't think that his virtues were balanced by a lack of intelligence as is now said but more that his relentless drive was exhausting for those around him! Even in a military context he could be too much. I came across a story in one of the New Zealand histories where his soldiers sabotaged his tank in the desert to reduce its speed as they were desperate to cut the pace a little. And being both quick and good humored he adapted to their message without rancour. My father told of holidays in Scotland where the swimming was unbearably cold and yet Bernard was quite unbothered, though his enjoyment didn't manage to overcome my father's distaste for icy water. Then there were the soldiers, later met by my father, who were full of admiration for Bernard, but whose eyes would glaze over with horror when they remembered his marches from Windsor to London and back for the sake of fitness. As a very sedentary person his obsession with fitness and exercise sounded uncomfortable in the extreme. I wonder if now he would be classified as suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder but, whatever it was, it certainly didn't affect his focus and attention to detail. Maybe in the right context a certain drive, fitness and single-mindedness are not just desirable qualities but necessities.

The evidence for his courage came in the form of his many medals. After his death the medals alongside the dress medals were framed and placed in my grandmother's white bedroom - between the two large windows that looked down onto a green Chelsea Square.

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[2] Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations*, p.410. Comment from Lieutenant General Leonard Thornton, GSO 2, Operations at 2 NZ Division Headquarters at the battle of Alamein.

As a child I knew that they were special but not quite how special they were. Barbara did tell me their differing nationalities, but not the stories behind them - which makes them sound like a stamp collection.

Although I had been too young to go to Bernard's funeral, I had been to his very formal memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral. Upright military figures wore dark suits and either carried or wore bowler hats. Bernard's memorial service echoed a similar scene in the film Lawrence of Arabia (1962) and of course the event itself nearly thirty years earlier, as the venue was the same. Despite the time lag, Bernard was less than a year younger than Lawrence - but the attendees of his service also included veterans of the Second World War. A plaque commemorating Bernard's life was unveiled in the Crypt quite close to the bust of Lawrence himself.

I remember the excitement of the trip to London, the pressure on my older sister Annabel and I, then aged 5 and 3 years old, to behave ourselves and the bright dazzling lights of the cameras from the BBC. Of course there were a lot of people there but Bernard's family was just my grandmother Barbara, my father Paul - his only child - my mother, Annabel and me. There were many cousins from my grandmother's side but no one else from my grandfather's family and yet like Lawrence, he'd come from a large family.

Annabel and I were dressed for the occasion in identical outfits - red coats with velvet collars and red soft fur hats with matching red fur muffs. It was the sixties and we had red shoes with straps which buckled across. Annabel was blonde and I was dark. Understandably, given our age, the BBC focused in on us in a sea of adults. I was able to boast about it later at school, not so much about my grandfather but rather that I had been on television. I'd love to see footage of the service now.

To be honest, apart from the memorial service, my grandfather's life and memory didn't really feature in my childhood. We were of course children and he was dead and my grandmother was alive - and we lived in my grandmother's Victorian childhood home in Surrey. We were more likely to hear of my grandmother's father Herbert, who carved the dining room with swags of fruit and flowers in the manner of Grinling Gibbons or his sister, my Great Aunt Gertrude (Jekyll), whose home it had also once been. Gertrude's paintings, shell pictures and metalwork still adorned the house: even her glasses turned up 70 years later on the rafters of a garden shed.

When Barbara died in 1973, she was buried next to Bernard at St Martha's on the top of the hill on the Pilgrim's way to Canterbury. Later, many of her possessions, including a

painting of herself in a silver dress (woven from pre-revolution Russian silver thread) and one of Bernard in khaki against a background of golden desert ended up at our home. It is not surprising that his medals and her scrapbooks arrived too. But these weren't any old scrapbooks - these were extraordinary. There was one, sometimes two, for every year from 1918 to 1973. I don't want you to think that Barbara spent hours sticking the pictures in - they were professionally put together by a woman who came to her house on a regular basis.

The war volumes were in large, heavy red leather books with reinforced corners. Because I am quite small it was a struggle to carry them even the short distance from the bookcase to the table and once or twice I dropped a volume. The leather was slightly worn at the edges and when moved they left a trail of vermilion crumbs. They contained huge numbers of black and white photographs of the desert campaign. I have to confess that, as a teenager, a bit like reading War and Peace, I skipped a lot of the war bits. After all how many photographs of tanks in a desert battle can one be interested in? At crucial moments, the tanks in the photographs became rather small! That sounds rather superficial of me but without explanations it was difficult to understand how everything fitted together. My father never really commented on them despite walking past us to and from his study while we looked at them and he had been in the desert during those years.

I later found an excerpt written by Paul, about the task of clearing up the aftermath of a bombed tank, the horror of the deaths of the men inside the tank and how subsequently when in hospital himself he had seen other unlucky burnt tank survivors.[3] He didn't mention this to his teenage daughters. Instead he had a refrain about the heat, the tiny daily water allowance and how much they all looked forward to returning to Cairo.

The photographs were labelled. I'd only met a few of the men - Geoffrey Cox, John White, Sir Guido Salisbury-Jones - and as a teenager I'd been at home when an ex Australian soldier Roden Cutler and his wife visited. Subsequently, he became Governor of New South Wales. He was tall with twinkly eyes but only one leg. Naturally it wasn't mentioned when and how he lost his leg, obviously in the Second World War, but I've read the histories now which I hadn't then and he's there. He seems to have lost the same leg several times!

Still, I liked the photographs of my father, in his desert garb of the Long Range Desert Patrol, visiting Bernard's camp at Baggush in October 1941. Paul's untidily draped headdress makes one aware of the discomfort of the desert. He was only eighteen years old and it shows in the puppy fat of his smiling face. He is standing next to a slightly taller,

[3] Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations* p. 396.

neat Bernard but rather than this being a happy family occasion, there is a quality of both steadfastness and stoicism in Bernard's eyes as he knows only too well what is ahead.

Luckily there were also less martial scrapbooks and they showed Barbara's family - the Jekylls, my father Paul as a baby, then as a child with his half-brothers and many of his half-brothers' cousins – but no Freybergs. The scrapbooks included photographs of family parties and holidays, notes from friends and newspaper cuttings of announcements and telegrams, successes but also obituaries and funerals and a few world events like pages on the death of JFK. The scrapbooks of the '60s were covered in patterned or Florentine paper and these ones included photographs of the grandchildren (which I found especially interesting) - and holidays with Barbara in English coastal towns.

However most of all the scrapbooks told the story of Bernard from when he married Barbara in 1922, both in newspaper cuttings and in photographs. My grandmother had used a newspaper agency for the articles and Bernard's exploits were even retold in cartoons. Disappointingly there were no photographs of their wedding. I could understand that - it was my grandmother's second marriage and Bernard's success and fame in the First World War had made him a hero of the press and sometimes these things are private. They were married quietly in 1922 at St Martha's and J M Barrie was Best Man. The press reported it when they were told about it - but still, there were no photographs even for the family.

But never mind - there was so much else in there - things that had never been mentioned and that I knew nothing about. The newspaper cuttings revealed that Bernard had fought in Mexico for Pancho Villa, and on the outbreak of World War One he'd raced to Europe to join the war, via New York using prize money he'd won in a boxing match for his ship fare. He'd stopped Churchill in Whitehall to ask for a commission and then his career had taken off - first with Antwerp, then Gallipoli - with his heroic swim, not quite across the Dardanelles, but a different beach but through a cold April night to trick the Turks with flares about the landing points for the troops. And then the Somme and a VC, multiple wounds and more battles and more DSOs (three bars in total) and leading the last cavalry charge of World War I. And that was before almost swimming the Channel, standing, but not winning, a constituency as a MP. This was followed by the Second World War and his appointment as Commander-in-chief to the New Zealand Division. There was little on the failure of the Greek campaign - Crete was mentioned as his loss and the details were scanty - but as this was followed by successfully driving the final wedge into the enemy line at El Alamein, there was no need to dwell on it. And finally Italy, capturing Venice and Trieste, and then his return to New Zealand as Governor General.

The verdict was hero undoubtedly and leader of men.

Understandably after my grandmother Barbara died, my father became a representative of my grandfather. As a teenager I was aware of the passing of Bernard's generation - not from the Second World War but from the First. At boarding school, Annabel and I were allowed to watch on Matron's television my father commenting on the news of the last meeting of the veterans of the Royal Naval Division - the soldiers and sailors, for they were both, were also interviewed. They seemed tremendously full of vim and vigour in their nineties with broad regional accents which spoke of a different era. Just like the New Zealanders, they sounded devoted to Bernard.

My father retired from the army in the late 1970s and got to work writing a biography of Bernard - it's been published and it's a good book. Annabel helped him with it, and many gaps were filled in.

The only photographs of Bernard in the scrapbooks before he came to England were those that the New Zealand Press took of him as a swimming competitor or champion in New Zealand in 1908 and 1910 and these were subsequently used for articles on him after the First World War. Bernard didn't possess any family photographs. I couldn't find any photographs of his mother, his father or any of his four brothers. My father was his only child - there wasn't anywhere else for any photographs to go.

Except there was one photograph which puzzled me. It had been taken by the New Zealand Press and published in New Zealand and it showed his arrival on the dockside in Wellington in 1946 to take up his new post of Governor General of New Zealand. There were his two remaining brothers Cuthbert and Claud waiting to greet the returning hero and yet unlike every other photograph of him, he looked absolutely furious. I couldn't see his brother's faces as the photographs were taken from slightly behind them and what one could see of them was in shadow but I could see their shabby raincoats. Maybe that's unfair - it was raining and it was pre-modern fabrics and the rain had stained their coats with uneven patches of water.

But when my father came to write of this[4] - he never mentioned Bernard's brothers waiting to greet him on the dockside, instead he had them on the quay when Bernard left to return to England in August 1952 next to the New Zealand Prime Minister and Cabinet, a guard of honour, a band, a fly past of Vampires, a crowd of friends and soldiers and chorus of

[4] Paul Freyberg, Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations pp. 552-4.

sirens and hooters from every ship in the harbour. All of which was tremendous. You Tube now has a film of the event but curiously I couldn't identify his brothers there.

So all I have is the earlier published photograph of Bernard's arrival and I can't even see his brother's faces. Surely the New Zealanders themselves would have been interested in seeing the three together? And why did Bernard look so angry? As a teenager I concluded that he was embarrassed by them, rushing down the gang plank towards them without Barbara as they stood upright and immobile, waiting with photographers behind them - Cuthbert and Claud were obviously winding him up in some way, but why shouldn't they be there to greet Bernard on his triumphant return?

The other puzzling thing about my father's book was the emergence of a few new photographs - from goodness knows where. Annabel had no idea when I much later thought to ask her. There was one of Oscar, one of Paul, one of Cuthbert and one of Bernard aged 5 in 1894. There was no photograph of Claud and none of the brothers together at any stage. Paul and Oscar had died without children in the First World War. Claud had never married or had any children. Cuthbert by then was also dead and although he had a couple of children, I didn't know their names or ages and it was vaguely thought that they lived in New Zealand or perhaps Australia.

Maybe I should cut out the shadowy New Zealand brothers as in terms of a serious military investigation they are irrelevant. But I am looking at this also from a family point of view and this charged dockside moment seems significant. It may just be that families can be supremely irritating – but I was puzzled by this mixture of anger and absence. Bernard however treated his New Zealand Division like a family, looking out for his men – their welfare: clubs, medical care, food, drink, exercise and discipline – no detail was too small[5] and this regard and his common sense approach was unusual at the time. Unlike the British Army, his officers first served in the ranks.[6]

He also took his own and his officers responsibilities very seriously. On one occasion he intervened in the findings of the Military Court on a rare case (that's rare with the New Zealanders) of a unit's cowardice. Bernard had the sentence of collective guilt removed and he re-directed the Military Court to find the officers guilty. I don't think that the New Zealand Division was a replacement family but his empathy, combined with courage and decisive action came from somewhere.

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[5] Bernard also wrote a book on the subject called: *A Study of Unit Administration* (1933)

[6] Geoffrey Cox, *A Tale of Two Battles* (1987) p.20. Geoffrey Cox, one of Bernard's Intelligence Officers mentions serving initially in the ranks.

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Of course, now that Bernard, my father Paul and most of their generation have died, there has been a more objective re-assessment of the disaster of Crete and it's not pretty. The loss had devastating consequences for the Cretans. The German execution of over 2,000 villagers that summer was horrific and an acknowledgement of that is unavoidable. One film of a mass execution at Kontomari on the 2nd June 1941 can be seen on the internet - the simplicity and freshness of the very rural village and the lack of any stage management or formality makes it chilling.

Normally if you see photographs of bodies in concentration camps, the harshness of the setting and the lack of greenery makes them seem separate and de-personalized but here the very ordinariness of country life is violated. The village men can be seen in their everyday white shirts, dark waistcoats and trousers - a couple of them even have summer hats like labourers in a sketch by Seurat. There is a grotesque contrast between the modestly dressed villagers and the Germans who round them up. The Nazis are wearing skimpy summer shorts and hard round paratrooper helmets and the commander is wearing a colonial topee. One can actually see the faces of the Nazi officers making the decision of how to kill them. There doesn't appear to be a debate over whether to kill them. The unconcerned villagers sit on the bank of a country road as a young Greek interpreter talks to the officers. In one full frontal shot I was a bit taken back as this young man, who looks understandably troubled, has an uncanny likeness to a young Patrick Leigh Fermor, the British travel writer, who had been in Crete literally a few days earlier. The man does look different from the side angle. The village men are then moved further back onto uneven ground in a gnarled olive grove whereupon at least 23 Germans line up in two rows on the road and rapidly reduce the Cretans into small crumpled heaps of clothing.

And, indirectly, Bernard by losing the battle was responsible. The newspapers that had reported on him for over 50 years had skimmed over this at the time. Only later did it become the controversial story.

The German parachute invasion had started the Battle of Crete on the 20th May 1941. After two days of fighting, the Allies lost Maleme airfield on the north-west coast. This loss enabled the Germans to fly in fresh soldiers and supplies. The Germans were then able to push east, seize the rest of the island and pursue the remaining Allied soldiers over the White Mountains.

Bernard had been forewarned and given accurate details of the German invasion plan, which had surreptitiously been obtained from Ultra, the very advanced and complex German communications system. For understandable reasons, Britain didn't want the Germans to know that it had intercepted Ultra and so abnormal restrictions were placed on the use of the intercepted material. Official secrecy prevented any acknowledgement of the Ultra intercepts for over 30 years after the Battle of Crete.

I wasn't happy with my father's explanations. I understood why he blamed the Ultra material for handicapping normal defensive actions but he also blamed the realisation of Bernard's earlier concerns that some of his commanders, whom he had been unable to remove, were too old for the hand-to-,hand fighting.[7] The military historian Antony Beevor[8] has criticized my father for blaming Ultra restrictions but no one, not even their families defended his subordinate but senior commanders in the battlefield. I thought , this was unfair. Although logically the fault was possible, it still felt wrong. It wasn't a blame that Bernard, as far as I could see had apportioned in his own lifetime.

Beevor describes Bernard as being confused about the relative strengths of the airborne and seaborne German forces and lacking the analytical skills (intellect and scepticism) necessary to identify inconsistencies within the Ultra interceptions. He was placed, by one senior staff officer, Brigadier Eric Dorman-Smith in his "bear of little brain" category.[9]

Even worse, Beevor[10] found a damning quote from Bernard.

'**We for our part were mostly preoccupied by seaborne landings, not by the threat of air landings**.' Initially I thought that this quote came from Colonel Stewart, Bernard's Chief of Staff, but instead it was discovered by I. MacD. G. Stewart, a Medical Officer with the 1st Welch in Crete. It was also only found and published in 1966 after Bernard's death.[11]

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[7] Paul Freyberg *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations*, page 304.

[8] Antony Beevor *Crete The Battle and the Resistance* (1991 paperback 2005) pp.88-9

[9] Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C. Soldier of Two Nations* p.375 'Bernard described General Auchinlech as 'well known as a bad judge of a man and he assembled round him a bad staff'. General Dorman-Smith, was Auchinlech's Deputy CGS Middle East and Bernard considered him 'a bad choice.'

[10] Beevor, *Crete The Battle and the Resistance* p. 91.

[11] I. McD. G Stewart *The Struggle for Crete* (1966) p. 108 – Davin Papers - Freyberg comments on Churchill draft 3rd March 1949

It's damning because Bernard should have recognized the priority of Maleme airfield and the delay in the counter-attack going in is understandably seen as his fault. He even said **' I gave the order; neither Puttick nor Inglis was responsible for the delay.'** [12] Again this quote was only found and published after his death.

Beevor sadly relates Bernard's relative lack of interest in Maleme in the early days. And this has become the standard contemporary line on Bernard. Recently Max Hastings in *Churchill's Finest Years* called Bernard '**unfit for command responsibility**.'[13]

And I was shocked that his earlier deeds are now perceived differently. Beevor[14] described his youth as being one of '**ostentatious bravery**' his early career being endowed with '**the muscular morality of the Edwardian hero**.' It made him sound rather cheap and priggish and I didn't think he was either of those things.

I wasn't sure that this later explanation apportioned the blame accurately. Obviously there were blunders and Bernard did appear to be responsible for them but I suspected that this wasn't the whole picture. If I was going to defend him, then I knew that I would have to look at the story in greater detail. I can't say the idea of researching battles thrilled me. It didn't. But I knew a closer examination was necessary.

I was also going to have to consider the circumstances both before the battle and the outcome that various protagonists wanted. Lurking at the back of mind was a dishonourable alternative explanation of the failure to hold Crete: that the battle had been deliberately thrown and was in fact part of a staged and planned retreat. In May 1941 Britain was isolated, we had no allies of any strength, and our whole position in the Middle East was vulnerable. A negotiated peace with Germany was a distinct possibility. It is conceivable that high-level communications to this end with the Germans, which would still be inadmissible, were on-going. If the Allies had actually won in Crete, Hitler would have had to postpone his Russian invasion and events in the war would have been different.

The Greek Campaign and the Battle of Crete delayed the start of the German invasion of Russia by six weeks and this significant delay allowed the weather to halt the German

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[12] I. McD. G. Stewart, *The Struggle for Crete* p.307. Freyberg's comment on Davin draft – 5th December 1949

[13] Max Hastings, The Finest Years (2010) p.135.

[14] Beevor, Crete, The Battle and the Resistance pp. 82-3.

advance on Moscow and prevent the anticipated defeat of the Russians.[15] Bernard, by taking charge of the Battle of Crete also allowed General Wilson – the Commander-in-Chief of the Allies' Expeditionary Force to Greece - to exit Crete and sort out the simultaneous problems in Iraq and deal with the Vichy French in Syria. These too were crucial areas for an Allied victory (the oil supply) and Wilson successfully dealt with them.

In 1941, the Battle for Crete did not play out the way history has since told it.

[15] Field-Marshal Lord Wilson of Libya*, Eight Years Overseas* (1948) pp.101-3. General Wilson, the Commander of the Greek Campaign compares the German invasion of Russia with Napoleon's 1812 invasion.