

# Debunking Freyberg's Mexico myth

Ian McGibbon addresses a longstanding but intriguing misconception about Bernard Freyberg's early military service.

Bernard Freyberg's storied life is a central element in New Zealand's military heritage. The winner of a Victoria Cross in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, commander of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force in the Second World War, governor-general of New Zealand — he was a man of mythical greatness (Churchill called him the 'salamander of the British Empire',<sup>1</sup> a salamander being a legendary creature that flew close to fire). But there is one element of his life that is the product of pure myth — his supposed service in Mexico's civil war before the First World War and his escape to the United Kingdom to secure a commission in the newly formed Royal Naval Division, with which he would fight at Gallipoli and later on the Western Front. In New Zealand military historiography, it is a myth that for durability is on a par with the myth of Colonel William Malone's supposed refusal of an order to attack on Chunuk Bair during the August offensive at Gallipoli in 1915.<sup>2</sup> And it seems that Freyberg propagated the myth himself when he reached London in August 1914.

The source of the myth was a newspaper report of his involvement in the Mexican civil war which appeared shortly after he arrived in the United Kingdom.

He went recently to America for a holiday, and there, in a spirit of adventure, he took service as a transport officer under General [Pancho] Villa, one of the opponents of the Mexican usurper Huerta. He had only been in this position for two or three weeks and was in the province of Durango when the war broke out. It would have been useless to ask to resign, so Mr Freyberg left the Villa camp in the night and made for Mazatlan, on Mexico's Pacific coast, walking by day and hiding by night. Thence he went to San Diego, Los Angeles, Cheyenne, and Chicago, and from New York... to Liverpool.<sup>3</sup>

By 1915 a new element had been added: 'Some time ago he went out to Mexico and offered his services to Huerta. Huerta did not want him, so he went and fought with Villa on the opposite side.'<sup>4</sup>

These reports informed the accounts prepared by subse-

quent biographers, notably Peter Singleton-Gates and Freyberg's son Paul Freyberg.<sup>5</sup> Media reports were supported, in the latter's case, by later reminiscences of men who were in Mexico at the time that suggested acquaintance with a person who they thought in retrospect was Freyberg. These reminiscences greatly altered the shape of the myth. Later embellishments had him serving as a general, 'escaping' from Villa's army on war's outbreak and trekking 800 kilometres to the port of Tampico, on the Gulf of Mexico, to embark by sea for New York and thence to the United Kingdom.

Most recently, Matthew Wright has entered the lists with his 2020 biography of Freyberg. He comes down on the side of his predecessors' assertions that Freyberg served in the civil war, stating that there was 'no question' he was in Mexico in July–August 1914.<sup>6</sup> In going with a good story, Wright has overlooked readily available evidence that points in an opposite direction — that Freyberg was still in California when the First World War began. Freyberg never went to Mexico, and, romantic as the tale of his trek to Tampico to take passage to the United Kingdom is, he actually set off for the war from San Francisco.

Although noting a 4 July report in the *New Zealand Free Lance* that Freyberg had returned to San Francisco, Wright states baldly that Freyberg was 'definitely' back in Mexico on 4 August 1914. He speculates about whether he was present at the Battle of Zacatecas on 23–24 June, though he is not sure on which side. Wright cites as evidence a Freyberg 'letter to Elliott', a Wellington dentist, from Mexico and 'a telegram he sent from Tampico', where Wright accepts he had trekked after deserting Villa's force.<sup>7</sup>



Pancho Villa (fourth from right)

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**Military hero Bernard Freyberg's illustrious career reads like an episode from the *Boys Own Annual*. His courage and command in the two world wars made him a global celebrity, his adventurous aura enhanced by his apparent service as a mercenary in the Mexican civil war in 1914. Even today biographers proclaim this participation as a fact. But, in reality, he spent the three months before the outbreak of war in California, and left for London from San Francisco. Freyberg himself appears to have propagated the Mexico myth — not the only time he played fast and loose with facts about his early life.**

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## Dubious evidence

Let us examine this ‘evidence’ more closely. The so-called letter to Elliot is in fact a statement made to Singleton-Gates when he was writing his biography, which appeared in the 1960s. Elliott stated that ‘he heard from Freyberg in Mexico’.<sup>8</sup> An actual letter from Mexico would be irrefutable evidence of Freyberg’s presence there, but this is a statement Elliott made at least 40 years after the event, a period in which the myth of Freyberg’s Mexico service had been repeatedly stated in the media. In short, this is very weak evidence indeed.

What of the telegram from Tampico? There is no evidence of any such communication. The only telegram referring to Freyberg’s departure for the United Kingdom was sent by the British consul-general in San Francisco to Wellington on 7 August. Wright, to fit this into his narrative, implies that from Tampico Freyberg telegraphed the consul-general in San Francisco, who then notified Wellington — a circuitous route indeed, and one that was unnecessary: the British consul in Tampico could easily have sent a cable to Wellington. But Freyberg never went anywhere near Tampico, and, as demonstrated below, the cable to Wellington was initiated by Freyberg in San Francisco.

## War fever

So what did happen? When Freyberg arrived in San Francisco on 20 April 1914, he found a state of excitement. With President Wilson seeking congressional approval for possible intervention against Mexican leader General Victoriano Huerta, war with Mexico seemed imminent. The day before, US cavalry had left the city for the Mexico–California border, infantry and artillery units were preparing to leave and the state militia was also being organised. There were reports of Americans being menaced by Mexican federal troops in Ensenada, 150 kilometres south of the border, and fears of a massacre of Americans in Mexico City. Men throughout the state were trying to join volunteer units for service in the seemingly imminent clash with Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

Influenced by this atmosphere, Freyberg also sought to get in on the action. ‘Last week’, he wrote on 28 April, just eight days after his arrival, ‘I gave my name in to go to Mexico, only to be told they did not require anybody other than those they had, and if they required any volunteers I would be written to.’ He then heard of another opportunity. ‘A private crowd are going to the front for a big picture combine. I have offered to go and help them in any capacity they like, and may get away with them.’<sup>10</sup> He later informed another friend that he had ‘signed up as an armed guard looking after the National Film Unit [Corporation], which is going to the Mexican War to take pictures of the war’.<sup>11</sup> Almost certainly this was the ‘complete moving picture outfit and an operator from the Universal Film Manufacturing Company’ that left San Francisco with a large body of troops in early May. ‘Arrangements for this had to be made in a short



Bernard Freyberg took part in swimming and water polo competitions in California

space of time, and at the last moment there was a rush to secure certain equipment and supplies.’<sup>12</sup>

The film unit spent some time filming the border military activities in southern California before returning to the city. Freyberg must have written to someone in New Zealand about his experience — a letter that would have taken at least three weeks to reach New Zealand in those pre-air mail days. The details were provided to the *New Zealand Free Lance*, for on 4 July it stated, inaccurately, that Freyberg had returned ‘safe and sound’ from ‘an excursion down to that effervescing republic — Mexico — as escort or companion to a cinematographer’.

Late in May Freyberg was still trying to make up his mind about enrolling at the University of California.<sup>13</sup> On the 25th, under the headline ‘Blue-Gold Get Australian Rigger’, the *San Francisco Call* reported that he was ‘desirous of taking an American degree in dentistry and will enter the Affiliated colleges in September.... He will take an active interest in the swimming at the university, and at the coming big swimming meet to be held at Sutro tank, he will enter some of the events, under the colors of the Barbarian [Football and Athletic] club.’

This left Freyberg with three months to fill before the university term began. Looking for work, he went to Sacramento, and up into nearby lumber camps.<sup>14</sup> In early June he was in Bakersfield, the centre of California’s oil industry. Perhaps envisaging that he could use his dentistry skills in the undeveloped, unregulated environment south of the border, he told a friend he was ‘going down to Mexico to look for a job of any description as I think I would like to see a bit of that part of this continent’. Before he could put this plan into action, however, he secured employment in the oil fields surrounding Coalinga, about 250 kilometres southwest of San Francisco; he was remembered as an ‘oil field official’.<sup>15</sup> One newspaper stated that he lived ‘most of the time during his brief stay in California, in Coalinga’. In 1941 the *Hanford Sentinel* had a story about him headlined ‘Defender of Crete Once Coalinga Man’.<sup>16</sup>

It seems likely that Freyberg spent up to six weeks in Coalinga, long enough for him to become so lonely that, on one occasion, he walked 20 kilometres to see an Australian shearer.<sup>17</sup> Despite living in Coalinga, he ‘came north for the important athletic events, in which he participated’, including water polo events with San Francisco’s Olympic Club.<sup>18</sup> He also went to swimming events in Bakersfield on successive weekends: to organise water polo teams on 28 June and to referee, judge and compete in an Independence Day aquatic carnival on 4 July.<sup>19</sup>

## Stanford spell

Sometime in July Freyberg returned to San Francisco. An indication of his activities in the latter half of that month was later provided by Stanford University sports director Harry Maloney:

While Freyberg was waiting around for U.C.’s [University of California’s] fall semester to open two friends of his, Danny Carroll and Jim Wylie, invited him to visit Stanford.... So Freyberg came down to the Farm, spending a couple of weeks at the S.A.E. [fraternity] house. It is reported that Freyberg enjoyed Stanford so much that he was ready to throw over Cal and dentistry and sign

with the Indians [Stanford].<sup>20</sup>

Maloney also stated that Freyberg was ‘never an officer in Pancho Villa’s army (was never in Mexico, in fact)’. His recollection places Freyberg at Stanford in the period when, according to the *Evening Post* account, he was in Mexico.

In his biography Paul Freyberg cited circumstantial and anecdotal evidence for his father’s Mexican service at the time of war’s outbreak, including the recollections of the British vice-consul (Patrick O’Hea) in Torreón, near Durango, who claimed to have helped an unnamed New Zealand dentist to head to the United Kingdom via Tampico in August 1914. But the San Francisco newspapers, and recollections of several people who knew him in San Francisco, are more compelling evidence. They indicate that Freyberg was in San Francisco on the night war erupted in Europe. One of the persons was former All Black Jim Wylie, who had toured California with the team in 1913 and remained in the state when it returned home. After Freyberg won his VC, he recalled that he had been with Freyberg in the San Francisco Press Club when ‘the news of the outbreak of the war was received’ in the evening, presumably, of Saturday, 1 August 1914. In a ‘WAR EXTRA!’ that day, the *San Francisco Call* carried the headline ‘WAR DECLARED’.

According to Wylie, Freyberg walked with him to San Francisco’s Third and Townsend railway depot ‘to see the “Old All-Blacks” off to Stanford and bought five special editions during their short walk.’<sup>21</sup> Next day, he played ‘a wonderful game for the Barbarians against the Surf Beach in the water polo championship game’.<sup>22</sup> But his mind was on the events unfolding in Europe. By 5 August he knew the British Empire was in the war: the *San Francisco Call* that day carried the headline: ‘[KING] GEORGE CALLS FOR VOLUNTEERS’. Determined to get to the United Kingdom as quickly as possible, Freyberg secured a booking on the ss *Cedric*, which was leaving New York on 14 August.<sup>23</sup>

## Freyberg’s departure

On 7 August, under the headline ‘Football Hero to Fight for England’, the *San Francisco Call* reported that Freyberg ‘leaves for New York today’. We can be reasonably certain that any Mexican service, had there been any, would have been mentioned in this story of Freyberg’s departure. On the contrary, and ironically, his ‘football friends in California’ were later reported to remember that when setting out for the war Freyberg had said ‘I have never done any fighting. I rather expect I shall be an awful coward.’<sup>24</sup>

Freyberg had ignored a proclamation issued in San Francisco calling for all Australian and New Zealanders liable for military service to report to their countries’ commissioners in the city.<sup>25</sup> As a reserve officer in the New Zealand Territorial Force, he had a duty to report his whereabouts to the military authorities in New Zealand. He had the British consul-general in San Francisco, Carnegie Ross, cable the ‘War Office’ in Wellington: ‘Lieu-



Jim Wylie

tenant Freyberg reports that left for England to be attached.’ In noting this action, the *San Francisco Call* suggested that he was ‘going direct to London and will enlist there with an English regiment’.<sup>26</sup> Another newspaper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, probably correctly identified his motive in a later report: ‘When the present war broke out so anxious was Freyberg to join the colors that he left at once for England instead of New Zealand it being his fear that with a territorial regiment he might be shipped away from the central zone of the fighting.’<sup>27</sup> A New Zealand expeditionary force might find itself confined to garrison duty in an imperial backwater, rather than deployed to Europe.

Freyberg arrived in New York in time to attend the Davis Cup tennis match between the United States and Australasia on 13 August. Embarking the next day, he reached Liverpool ten days later, and on 25 August he took the train to London.<sup>28</sup> Somehow, he almost immediately came into contact with the New Zealand Associated Press correspondent in the British capital, Guy Scholefield, who dispatched to Wellington on 27 August the report quoted at the start of this article. Published in the *Evening Post* on 13 October, this was the first public expression of Freyberg’s Mexican ‘adventure’. The details of this report suggest strongly that Scholefield received them from Freyberg himself, who in short spun a yarn. Even allowing for journalists’ propensity to get facts wrong, the content of the story indicates a deliberate attempt to doctor the truth.

Why would Freyberg lie? He was keen to secure a commission, and might have felt that some active service would help his case. His exotic experience was quickly taken up by the press, and the story took on a life of its own as Freyberg’s celebrity rose. Of course, it was almost impossible to check such details easily — and there was no incentive to do so. Questions might, however, have been asked about this story. Why would Villa appoint someone as transport officer who could not speak Spanish? Could Freyberg have travelled the 250 kilometres from Durango province to Mazatlán, ‘walking by day and hiding by night’, in time to catch trains from there to San Diego, a more than 1000-kilometre trip requiring several connections? How would he have heard about the outbreak of war in time to make the journey in that time, given the primitive conditions in Mexico.

As the story grew, Freyberg made no attempt to disown it. Perhaps he enjoyed the notoriety it brought him. It gave an adventurous aura that stood him in good stead in the Royal Naval Division, in which fellow officers and friends like the ill-fated poet Rupert Brooke also had exotic backgrounds. If, as seems probable, he started the story, he would have had little incentive to expose himself as a hoaxer — Scholefield would have pounced on such an admission. It explains Freyberg’s later reticence in speaking about his time in California.

Not until 1948 did Freyberg finally come clean: ‘But I would like to say that I have never been to Mexico’, he told a gathering of Australian war veterans in Melbourne. ‘That story started in 1916. The story has been voiced with such authority and for so long that I no longer bother to contradict it.’<sup>29</sup> Even this was an obfuscation, for he knew full well that the story began in 1914. In 1949, he revised his entry in *Who’s Who in New Zealand*, excising the mention of service in Mexico that had been in the previous edition.<sup>30</sup>

## Misleading statements

The Mexico hoax was not the first time that Freyberg played fast and loose with facts about his past. In the most egregious instance he claimed in California to have been selected for the All Black team that toured that state and British Columbia in October–November 1913. This led the *San Francisco Call* on 25 May 1914 to enthusiastically report that

The University of California is to get one of the best rugby forwards that has played the game in New Zealand. He was selected for the All Black team that visited us last season, but unfortunately could not make the trip at the last minute. This champion, who is to throw in his lot with the blue and gold, is Bernard Freyberg, and that he will be a big acquisition to California and somewhat counterbalance the advantage that Stanford has with two Australasians [Wylie and Carroll], is a foregone conclusion.

In August the same paper stated that ‘He was originally invited to come to this country with the All-Black team last year, but the death of his father kept him from making the tour.’<sup>31</sup> Who else but Freyberg could have provided these details?

Freyberg was a good rugby player, having played three first-class games for Horowhenua in 1913. Despite his inexperience, he was even nominated by that union for the North Island team which played the South Island at Christchurch on 26 July 1913,<sup>32</sup> but was not selected. Nor was he selected for the All Black team. The California tour was in fact completed two months before the death of Freyberg’s father in January 1914. Despite the local anticipation, Freyberg never played a rugby game in California — it was the off-season.

Even men of legend are human beings, with human failings. Freyberg’s early career indicates that he was not averse to shaping the facts to his advantage. The myth he seems to have propagated about his supposed activities in Mexico should now be confined to history.

## NOTES

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2. Ian McGibbon, ‘An Entrenched Myth’, *Sunday Star Times*, 22 Apr 2018.
3. *Evening Post*, 13 Oct 1914.
4. *Dominion*, 22 Jul 1915.
5. Peter Singleton-Gates, *General Lord Freyberg VC, An Unofficial Biography* (London, 1963), pp.25–6; Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C., Soldier of Two Nations* (London, 1991), pp.27–34.
6. Matthew Wright, *Freyberg, A Life’s Journey* (Auckland, 2020), p.30.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.30–1.
8. Singleton-Gates, p.20.
9. *San Francisco Call*, 20, 24, 26 Apr 1914.
10. Freyberg to Lucinda Penboss, 28 Apr 1914, quoted in Freyberg, pp.29–30.
11. *Ibid.*, p.28.
12. *Moving Picture World*, vol 20, no 7 (16 May 1914), p.98.
13. Freyberg, p.29, quoting a letter of 24 May.
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15. See *Hanford Morning Journal*, 18 Aug 1942.
16. *Fresno Bee*, 2 Jul 1942; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 Aug 1917; *Hanford Sentinel*, 22 May 1941.
17. *Hanford Morning Journal*, 18 Aug 1942; Freyberg to Barbara McLaren, 16 Jan 1918, quoted in Freyberg, p.29.
18. *The Wasp*, 26 Jan 1918; *Fresno Bee*, 2 Jul 1942; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 Aug 1917.
19. *Morning Echo*, 27 Jun, 3, 5 Jul 1914.
20. *Stanford Daily*, 14 Apr 1943 (emphasis added).
21. *Auckland Star*, 22 Sep 1917.
22. *San Francisco Call*, 7 Aug 1914.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Auckland Star*, 18 Jan 1917.
25. *San Francisco Call*, 6 Aug 1914, ‘Colonialists Plan Rally Tonight’.
26. The cable, dated 7 Aug 1914, is on Freyberg’s personal file, Archives New Zealand, D2/545.
27. *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 Jan 1915.
28. Freyberg, pp.33–4.
29. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 Dec 1948.
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31. *San Francisco Call*, 7 Aug 1914.
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