

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE POPE

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SETTLING THE BILL, The Memoirs of Bill Dougdale (Endeavour, London 2011) includes the story of how Paul Freyberg (#2079) came to meet the Pope.



Paul Freyberg with his father serving with the Long Range Desert Group in 1941

'The next excitement was a private audience with Pope Pius XII (Pacelli). My fellow Grenadier Paul Freyberg had been captured at Anzio and, whilst being marched to captivity, had hurled himself from a bridge over a stream, and hid in a culvert underneath. He was lucky as my old mucker, Anthony Courage, who was ahead of him in the column looked round and, seeing Paul gone, had made a run for it and was shot by the German escort. Anyway Paul lay low and, walking by night, got into the Vatican City and was hidden by the British Ambassador's butler in a cellar to priests' houses. He turned up, after the fall of Rome, looking like a cross between an opera singer and a gangster. His mother, Lady Freyberg (#3175), married to Sir Bernard Freyberg, (#3174) the general commanding the New Zealand Corps, thought he ought to thank the Pope for his stay, so an audience was arranged.'

'It was a private audience and so, after attending the public one (where we saw the Pope carried in on his sedilia by the Noble Guard of distinguished bearded Romans, in black tail coats and decorations, and snapped by hundreds of GIs shouting, "Aw, hold it Popey!"), we were escorted down the corridor to one of the private audience chambers, and awaited the arrival of the Pontiff. There were about ten of these private audience chambers, each with a prie-dieu and a small altar and crucifix. After about forty minutes, the door was thrown open and there stood the Pope; tall (over six foot), thin and wearing pancake-white makeup. He spoke to Paul and Lady Freyberg in perfect English but, when they replied, it was clear he was not nearly so good at understanding what was said to him. Anyway,



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the audience lasted for about ten minutes and then he beckoned us to our knees, blessed us, and proceeded on his way to the next audience. Afterwards, Paul and Lady Freyberg took us off to the Orso restaurant where we celebrated the audience in fine style all afternoon.'