

Thoughts on the Memorial to Major-General Hobart in Deddington

17 August 2024

It is really wonderful that there is now a permanent reminder that Major-General Hobart's family lived for eight years in our community. It may not sound a long time, but for a man who entered the Army Cadets at 16 and served in India, Flanders, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt, as well as all over the UK, it was probably the longest family home he ever knew.

The family (Patrick, Dorothea and 10 year-old daughter Grizell) moved into Leadenporch House in September 1940. Britain was at a low ebb. You may think we have seen some low tides ourselves recently – but try to imagine September 1940.

Poland has fallen. Norway has fallen. Belgium, Holland and France have fallen. The Nazis and the Soviets have agreed not to attack each other. President Roosevelt is sympathetic to Britain but is opposed by a nationalist, isolationist Republican party determined to put America First. The Battle of Britain is being fought in the skies over Southern England and the first bombing raids are striking London by night. A fleet of invasion barges is waiting across the Channel for the Luftwaffe to achieve air supremacy.

Meanwhile, Major-General Hobart, as he arrives to take up the lease of a rather decrepit old farmhouse in Deddington, has been enduring his own Darkest Hour.

Nine months earlier he was in Egypt training a mobile armoured division that later became famous as the Desert Rats. But after a falling-out with his commanding officer, he had been relieved of his command and sent home.

Six months earlier, no other post having been found for him, he was automatically placed on the Army retired list.

Four months earlier, now a Lance-Corporal in the Local Defence Volunteers, he had been standing guard duty on a hill outside Chipping Campden carrying a wooden dummy rifle as the entire British Expeditionary Force raced for the Channel ports and abandoned almost all its equipment, including its tanks, on the beaches around Dunkirk. The man who for 15 years had been the leading tank strategist in the British army felt utterly useless.

But the end of September 1940 marked the end of Britain's darkest hour, and Hobo's too. By then he was in discussion with Winston Churchill himself about how to rebuild the Army's armoured capability. Hitler had also fatefully abandoned his attempt to destroy the RAF and turned instead to bombing Britain's cities. The Battle of Britain ended in October and Operation Sealion (the invasion) was indefinitely postponed.

On 19 October Churchill wrote one of his most eloquent memos to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff:

'I was very pleased last week when you told me you proposed to give an armoured division to Major-General Hobart. I think very highly of this officer, and I am not at all impressed by the prejudices against him in certain quarters. Such prejudices attach frequently to persons of strong personality and original view. In this case General Hobart's original views have been only too tragically borne out. The neglect by the General Staff even to devise proper patterns of tanks before the war has robbed us of all the fruits of this invention. These fruits have been reaped by the enemy with terrible consequences. We should therefore remember that this was an officer who had the root of the matter in him, and also vision ...

... I have carefully read your note to me and the summary of the case for and against General Hobart. We are now at war, fighting for our lives, and we cannot afford to confine Army appointments to persons who have excited no hostile comment in their career. The catalogue of General Hobart's qualities and defects might almost exactly have been attributed to most of the great commanders of British history ... Cromwell, Wolfe, Clive, Gordon, and in a different sphere, Lawrence, all had very close resemblance to the characteristics set down as defects. They had other qualities as well, and so, I am led to believe, has General Hobart. This is a time to try men of force and vision and not to be exclusively confined to those who are judged thoroughly safe by conventional standards.

I hope therefore that you will not recoil from your proposal to me of a week ago, for I think your instinct in this matter was sound and true.'

On 8 November, writing from Leadenporch House, Deddington to 10 Downing Street, Hobo put himself at the PM's service and was appointed to train a new armoured division from scratch, the 11, known as the Black Bulls after the Hobart family emblem.

Four and a half years later he was commanding the 79th Armoured Division, the third he had trained, and whose role at D-Day even General Eisenhower recognised as pivotal to establishing the beachhead. By the end of the war it was the largest single unit in any Allied army with 1,500 armoured fighting vehicles and over 20,000 men. It fought in its specialist role supporting other units in every major campaign in North West Europe and General Hobart was at Luneberg Heath in May 1945 for the German unconditional surrender.

And then he came home to Deddington.