

## **Percy Cleghorn Stanley Hobart**

*The rebellious, eccentric genius who helped to ensure the success of Overlord*

Witnessing the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of good men across the muddy, bloody, battlefields of World War One, left a burning desire in the mind of more than one young officer to do everything possible to reduce the pointless barbarity of future conflicts.

Percy Cleghorn Stanley Hobart, nicknamed Hobo, was one of those young officers. He had fought valiantly with his men and been awarded the Military Cross in 1915. He was though, struck by the irony of senior staff officers living in the lap of luxury well away from the front line while thousands upon thousands of men from across the length and breadth of Great Britain and its Empire, were eating sleeping and dying in and around the sodden trenches.

He did however, become increasingly impressed with the initial impact of the newly introduced, lumbering armoured tanks and the implications for future land battles.

The Germans were quick to react to the new threat and began to widen their trenches having seen how easily tanks could become stuck trying to cross them. In response and observed by Hobart, the Brits found a way of placing huge bundles of wood to dump into trenches from the top of a tank, thus filling the void they needed to cross. The massive and slow-moving giants were however, increasingly vulnerable to the lowered barrels of German field guns. Meanwhile, the French were developing smaller and faster and more manoeuvrable Renault light tanks that the Germans found far more difficult to target.

Hobart could see that the static, set piece, 19th-century strategies espoused by the army's top brass, had to change and he 'ruffled feathers' by saying so, repeatedly. The Army must embrace technology and mobile weaponry, he was want to say often, but few would listen.

Clearly becoming something of a nuisance, he was sent out to India and then to Mesopotamia (Iraq) where he won the DSO, was wounded and briefly captured by the Turks. However, despite his bravery in action, it was said that Hobart exhibited 'disobedience and insubordination' during his time in the Middle East. Never mind that he was mentioned in dispatches no less than nine times!

After Staff College back in the UK, Hobart volunteered for the new Royal Tank Corps and became an instructor back in India where married the divorced wife of a junior officer; not the 'done thing' at the time, especially since he was the co-respondent in the divorce!

Moving back to England after a few years, Hobart was given command of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Tank Corps and was eventually promoted to Brigadier General. He went on to become the Inspector General of the Royal Tank Corps.

It was around this time that Hobart became friends with another proponent of mechanised warfare, Captain Basil Henry Liddell-Hart. Liddell-Hart had witnessed the horrors of the Somme, he was badly gassed in the battle and eventually, he was invalided out of the army.

Liddell-Hart became a military historian and theoretician and like Hobart, believed that mechanised warfare was the way forward, using fast moving vehicles to carry and support personnel and working alongside and protecting, equally mobile infantry and artillery. He also wrote about the need to use air superiority to support enemy forces on the ground. For Hobart this was a meeting of minds. As the war clouds began to gather in the mid to late 30s, Hart, who had begun working as a defence correspondent for first *The Telegraph* and then *The Times*, was drafted in by the government to work on strategy.

Hobart, as commander of the 1st Tank Brigade, was trying to put his theories into practice but met opposition from the likes of traditional thinker, Major General Archibald Wavell. Wavell wielded considerable power and influence and the War Department senior civil servants didn't much like the disruptive Hobart either. He was 'passed by' as the potential commander of the First Armoured Division.

In 1938, however, he was sent out to Egypt to develop and train the country's Second Armoured Division and he built up an immensely well respected and efficient army, which was eventually to become the equally admired 7th Armoured Division, the Desert Rats.

Meanwhile the *Wehrmacht* had been learning – and practising - the published doctrines of Liddell-Hart and Hobart. First Poland then the low-countries and France. Air superiority; surprise; fast-moving armour supporting infantry and artillery, with very efficient logistics right on its heels, the *Blitzkrieg* defeating the old dogma of the British and the French.

Hobart had never 'suffered fools gladly' and had made enemies in the past through his involvement in a fellow officer's divorce, and subsequently marrying the said divorced lady. Hobart's abrupt, irascible manner had further incensed his commanding officer in Cairo, Lt General Sir Robert Gordon-Finlayson, who (despite the efficiency and standing of the 7th Armoured Division) wrote a damning report on Hobart claiming he was a 'poor leader' and sent it to Wavell.

Egged on by senior figures in the War Department, Wavell fired Hobart and at the very time when Great Britain needed innovative strategic planning for its forces; at a time when Churchill was calling for new thought and new strategy given the 'Gathering Storm', one of the country's greatest military thinkers was sent to the Cotswolds to retire into obscurity.

Major General Percy Hobart wasn't about to sit around in the bucolic village of Chipping Campden (where he was then living), doing nothing when war was imminent. He immediately signed up for the Volunteer Force and was given the rank of ... Corporal!

Unconcerned about rank but very concerned about the lack of weaponry, Corporal Hobart set about making some crude weapons from scaffolding poles adding, with the help of a local welder, some sharp points on the end, much like an extended bayonet.

His superiors loved this and other initiatives and the former Major General quickly rose through the ranks of the newly named Home Guard to become second in command!

Fortuitously for the nation, however, two influencers whom Churchill respected greatly, also felt that Corporal Percy Hobart was more valuable to the nation than, with respect, just to Chipping Campden!

Back in 1934 Percy Hobart's sister Elizabeth, happened to have married a certain Bernard Montgomery, destined to take over Hobart's former 7th Armoured Division which would later kick Rommel out of Africa. Churchill rated Montgomery highly and was not above asking his opinions of certain officers.

Basil Liddell-Hart, also felt that Hobart was needed back in the army. And so it was that on 11 August 1940, the *Sunday Pictorial* newspaper published an article, written by Liddell, pointing out the vital need for innovative and lateral thinking to develop strategies to defeat the Nazis. The article, headlined, 'We Have Wasted Brains', made it plain that sacking

Hobart was a terrible mistake and that his foresight and talent was being wasted. The army's only experienced expert on armoured warfare, had been put out to grass!

The article was placed on Churchill's desk.

The 'great man' called Hobart to a meeting at Chequers in October 1940 and instructed the army hierarchy to re-appoint Hobart to develop a specialist armoured division. The decision was met with strong opposition from Wavell and his friends in the War Office.

Churchill, it will be remembered, was one of those, during World War I, who had considered armoured vehicles could break the stalemate of trench warfare, and he pointed out to those who opposed Hobart's re-appointment, that his (Hobart's) predictions of the changes in modern warfare had been 'only too tragically borne out' across Europe. Churchill accused the General Staff of 'neglect' in not organising armoured divisions before the outbreak of war.

Even despite this, further attempts were made to prevent Hobart taking command of an Armoured Division on the grounds of his age and health. Churchill wrote that he was shocked by the 'persecution' of Hobart by those who disliked him and who also refused to listen to the logics of armoured warfare. This against the background of failure after failure of the BEF in France and (prior to Monty taking over) the army in North Africa.

Eventually the 11th Armoured Division remained in the UK, Montgomery took Command of North Africa and newly appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Sir Allen Brooke, with his fresh and more innovative outlook, after various 'false starts' and hurdles were overcome, appointed General Percy Hobart commander of the 79th (Experimental) Armoured Division Royal Engineers in March 1943. Hobart's job was to analyse the need for a range of specialist armoured vehicles for specific tasks during a sea-borne invasion and later the push into Germany, to develop those armoured vehicles and recruit and train the best crews for the job. These specialists would be attached to assault forces and would never fight as a complete armoured division.

Churchill was insistent that Hobart keep him in touch with his progress and for he too was keen on developing special vehicles, having asked Lord Nuffield to design amphibious

vehicles ready for a seaborne invasion. In the event, it was Hobart's choices and designs that were to go into full-scale production

At last Percy Hobart's talent was to be used and he had the ear of Churchill and the leadership of the British armed forces. Churchill was secretly spending more and more time at Ditchley House in the Cotswolds, to avoid being targeted by the Luftwaffe. Hobart moved house to nearby Deddington and was indeed in regular touch with the Great Man.

Hobart analysed the needs of assault forces on different types of landing beaches, inland terrain and main waterway crossings. He looked at the failings and lessons learned from previous assaults back as far as the abject failure in Norway and especially the disaster of Dieppe. He drew up a list of problems faced by the invader and considered how the enemy would prepare for and attack those allied invaders. Nothing was left to chance and Hobart planned to test every piece of equipment, against every conceivable worst case scenario.

Others had already begun to consider the need for armoured vehicles that would have made a considerable difference at Dieppe and avoided the death of so many Canadian and British troops. Lt John Donovan of the Royal Canadian Engineers developed the concept of the AVRE. The Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers, a tank-based vehicle that could be adapted for uses including getting across impossible terrain, clearing mines, destroying bunkers and machine gun nests and breaching barriers such as sea walls – all of which were assets that were not available at Dieppe. Sappers needed to get close to obstacles in safety to destroy them and then withdraw in safety. Assault troops needed armour, tanks, and big guns available before and as they landed.

Hobart embraced these concepts and others and set about building test vehicles.

He was given two secret testing grounds in East Anglia and in Wales and access to the manufacturers of military hardware – whenever he needed it. RAF Benson's photo-reconnaissance flights brought back detailed images of the 'Atlantic Wall' defences, including sea walls, bunkers and beach obstacles and these were replicated near Orford in Suffolk.

The majority of the 'funnies' were based on Churchill and Sherman tanks; the Churchill because it was very well protected and had superb 'climbing' abilities and the Sherman

because it was very reliable and plentiful. The Valentine was used in some instances and Hobart chose the Caterpillar D7 and designed a deep wading, heavily armoured bulldozer (the D7A) to clear mined obstructions in the sea and on the beach and to drive exits for troops and vehicles off the beach. Allis Chalmers bulldozers were also lightly armoured and used for beach clearance. Centaur tanks also had their turrets removed and were equipped with a bulldozer blade.

Hobart invited American, British and Canadian top brass to Suffolk to witness the Funnies in action and Eisenhower and Omar Bradley in particular were so impressed they promptly put in orders for 'swimming tanks' and various AVREs.

The portfolio of Funnies was impressive.

Direct drive Sherman tanks fitted with canvas flotation screens and dual propellers could, in theory, be 'launched' from a landing craft tank a mile or two from the beaches and 'drop screens' when in shallow water and immediately take aim at enemy gun emplacements.

Armoured D7A bulldozers would land from LCTs with the first assault waves along with Sherman 'Crab' flail tanks that would clear a mine free path up the beach. The turret was turned to face the rear to avoid damage to the gun and sights from exploding mines. For those rough areas where the flail tank was unable to beat the ground properly, there was a Bullshorn Plough anti-mine tank with huge jaws to dig into the ground.

AVRE tanks with large spigot guns would follow to take out obstacles and bunkers and concrete sea walls. A Petard 290 mm spigot mortar (flying dustbin) containing 28lbs of high explosive could knock out most gun emplacements, if the tank could get within 150 yards of the target. Unfortunately, reloading was a cumbersome procedure which could only be achieved by the crew getting out of the turret.

Bobbin 'Carpet Layers' would follow swept tracks over shingle which would otherwise trap tracks and wheels, as happened at Dieppe, and lay a 'carpet of thick canvas in the ground. There were the AVRE Fascine tanks, reminiscent of WW1, carrying huge rolls of tightly packed saplings to be tipped into gullies and holes to allow tracked vehicles to pass over them. Dolphin deep wading AVREs towed a waterproof sledge that contained high explosive that sappers could use to destroy obstructions.

The Ark AVRE, again a Churchill without a turret, carried a platform and could be positioned against a sea wall or other obstruction so that main battle tanks could drive over them to exit a beach for example.

And if a bridge were needed another turretless tank, the Valentine Bridgelay, carried a folding 34ft folding bridge so that semi demolished bridges could be crossed in safety.

The Canal Defence tank was equipped with blindingly powerful searchlights which were used later in the war to blind the enemy at strategic points along key waterways.

One other vehicle Hobart did not develop but heartily approved of, was the REME BARV – British Armoured Recovery Vehicle – which again was a deep wader which was used on the beaches to recover ‘drowned’ vehicles.

Hobart was also keen on the US designed and built amphibious ‘Buffalo’ Landing Vehicle Tracked which could carry troops or equipment through reasonably calm waters onto the beach. These were used by the British army in preference to the smaller Neptune amphibious vehicle developed by Morris Motors.

In the event, while the Funnies were central to the success of the British and Canadian beaches, only DD swimming tanks were used on Omaha and then only two made it through the sea and onto the beach, the rest having sunk in rough seas when they were launched up to five miles out. One Captain, seeing the DDs sink out to sea, decided to beach his LCT but this ship load of swimming tanks was blown up as it reached the beach. On Utah, the DDs were far more successful having been launched much closer to the shore.

After the landings, there was much soul searching as to why the Americans failed to take advantages of the Funnies at Omaha and failed to learn the lessons of the DD tank practice landings prior to D Day. In truth the lack of production capacity in the UK, the lack of time to train the US engineers in their use and the problem of not having the spares or maintenance kits for the Brit machinery, all contributed to the situation. However, both Ike and Omar Bradley were fulsome in their praise for Percy Hobart and the 79th Royal Engineers and the role of the funnies at Normandy.

And thereafter at Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais, at the battles to dislodge the Germans along the Scheldt and the Rhine, the funnies excelled time and time again. Hobart and Liddle-

Hart's theories of using fast moving and adaptable armour to protect and enhance the effectiveness of the infantry, would never again be challenged.

Percy Hobart was at last recognised universally for his innovative thinking and was invited to be present on Luneberg Heath in May 1945 to witness the German Surrender.

He had already been knighted and after the war he was awarded the US Legion of Merit. He retired from the army in 1946 to his home at Deddington, Oxfordshire. Two years later Hobart moved to London when was appointed Secretary General of the Royal Hospital in Chelsea.

He died on 19 February 1957 and the man who witnessed the horror of the War to End all Wars and who recognised and spoke frequently of the value of mechanisation, received voluminous praise in his obituaries. It was noted that Hobart had not only changed military thinking but also that his Funnies and tactics had 'saved countless soldiers' lives'.

His friend Basil Liddell-Hart said of Hobart, that his forming and training of the 79th Armoured Division was 'The decisive factor on D-Day'.