

Voices of War Life Story

James Anthony Hibbert MBE, MC
1917 - 2014





Name: James Anthony Hibbert

Other names/aliases: Tony; the Maverick Major

Date of birth: 6 December 1917

Place of birth: Chertsey, Surrey.

Nationality: British

Date of death: 12 October 2014

Place of death: Trebah, UK

Service No: 71007

Unit(s): Royal Artillery, 1st Parachute Brigade

Rank: Major

Medals and awards: 1939–1945 Star; Star; Italy Star; France and Germany Star; Defence Medal; War Medal 1939–194; Mention in Despatches (1940 and 1946); Military Cross, MBE

Education & Employment: Marlborough College; family business - CG Hibbert; Royal Military Academy

Life Story

Early Life and Education

James Anthony Hibbert was born on 6 December 1917 in Chertsey, Surrey. His father was James Edmund Hibbert, initially a rubber planter in Malaya, before he commissioned into the South Lancashire Regiment at the outbreak of the First World War. Later he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps, ultimately achieving the rank of Squadron Leader. He was highly decorated, earning a Military Cross with two Bars, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and was Mentioned in Despatches numerous times.

In contrast, his mother, Margaret Judkins, was described as being “a daughter of the church” and came from a family of artists, marrying his father in 1916. The young Anthony was sent to study at Marlborough College, but sadly had to leave aged 16 due to financial pressures on the family caused by the Great Depression.

After leaving school, he commenced an apprenticeship with the family business, CG Hibbert, a wine and spirits merchants. As part of his training, he was sent to Germany in the early 1930s, where he lodged with the family of a Bavarian Gauleiter, whose sons were members of the Hitler Youth. This exposure alarmed him deeply, foreshadowing the coming war.

Outbreak of War

Hibbert enrolled in the Royal Military Academy (RMA), and upon passing out, was commissioned into the Royal Artillery in January 1938. At the outbreak of World War II, just days into hostilities, he arrived in Cherbourg with the British Expeditionary Force. During the Dunkirk evacuation (May–June 1940), he commanded a half-battery defending the northern perimeter. When ammunition was exhausted, he destroyed the guns to prevent their use by the enemy, and evacuated with his men—earning a Mention in Despatches for his leadership.

Driven by a desire to return to the front, Hibbert volunteered for No. 2

(Parachute) Commando, the forerunner to the Parachute Regiment. He later served in North Africa and Italy before being named Brigade Major of the 1st Parachute Brigade in July 1944. It was that role that was to bring him to the Netherlands next, as part of Operation Market Garden.

Arnhem, September 1944

Operation Market Garden, launched on 17 September 1944, aimed to secure bridges across the Netherlands, culminating at Arnhem to pave a swift route into Germany. A bold plan, but one that ultimately was to fail.



On 17 September 1944, Hibbert made ready to depart (Left: show before take-off) and parachuted in with the Brigade around 2pm

to relatively little opposition on the ground. Brigade HQ reached the Arnhem Bridge around 21:00 with the men of 2nd Parachute Battalion. The Brigade HQ and headquarters took position in a nearby attic as the defenders were forced to hold the bridge for 72 hours, far longer than the planned 48 hours.

Facing fierce German bombardment and dwindling resources, Hibbert took notes of daily events—including enemy tanks closing in and indoor artillery strikes—often hampered by failing communications. As the situation deteriorated, the men were forced back into the perimeter area and were split up.

On the 21st September, he was sought shelter in the coal shed of a house alongside Major Cotterill, a war reporter. They were discovered by a German patrol during a house search in the early hours of the morning and the pair were taken prisoner. From their erstwhile shelter, the two men were taken to a nearby church with some 25 other officers and around 200 men of other ranks where they remained for the rest of the day. Around 6pm, they were moved to a local hall, and around 3am the next day moved to a prisoner hold area of the SS Division. Having been deprived of food since capture, they were faring slightly better than the other men, most of whom hadn't eaten for five days.

After Major Hough raised strenuous complaints, they were all finally given some bread and meat paste.

On the morning of the 23rd, having avoided giving his name and address details, Hibbert was bundled onto a lorry, with one SS guard up front, and two armed Luftwaffe guards in the back. The wily soldiers soon realised that giving the V sign to the Dutch civilians as they passed by irritated their captors and they would stop the transport to remonstrate with them - an opportunity for escape that was too good to miss. Having signalled his intentions to Major Denis Mumford, as the truck stooped again, the men pushed the guards and jumped off. Mumford was recaptured, and one SS guard retaliated by shooting into the lorry, killing a number of fellow prisoners. Hibbert managed to escape, and was subsequently hidden by the Dutch Resistance.

He spent about three weeks in hiding, during which he coordinated with the Resistance and helped lead the famous Operation Pegasus I—a mass escape across the Rhine of over 130 men, including surviving members of the 1st Airborne Division .

During that escape mission, Hibbert severely broke his leg after falling off an overcrowded jeep in the dark, and this led to a long hospital stay of around five months.

Later War & T-Force

By April 1945, Hibbert was out of hospital—still using crutches—and assigned to T-Force. Recognizing the urgency to secure strategic German territory, he staged a daring move into Kiel. Facing bureaucratic obstacles and with the Russians advancing, he persuaded German naval authorities to surrender:

He “hobbled up the steps” of the naval HQ and invited surrender “on what he (dubiously) claimed were the direct orders of General Eisenhower.”

He was arrested for disobedience but soon released—with a bottle of champagne—and even praised by his Corps Commander, who confessed he “would have done the same thing”

In recognition of his bravery at Arnhem and the subsequent escape,

Tony Hibbert was awarded the Military Cross (MC).

Life after the War

Returning to civilian life, Hibbert stepped back into the family firm, C.G. Hibbert, a wine and spirits merchant company that had weathered both economic depression and wartime disruption. Under his leadership, the business was revitalized and expanded. He proved as resourceful in commerce as he had been in combat, introducing innovative ideas that would change the British retail landscape.

One of his bold ventures was to diversify beyond traditional wines and spirits. He moved into the emerging world of off-licenses and even pioneered soft drink canning, introducing the concept of ring-pull cans to the UK. This willingness to embrace modernity and take risks mirrored his wartime ingenuity—only now, his battlefield was the competitive post-war economy.

Hibbert's drive extended beyond business. He remained deeply connected to the military community and veterans' causes. For decades, he returned to Arnhem for commemorative events, forging lifelong bonds with Dutch families who had aided him during the war. These visits were often deeply emotional, as the memories of sacrifice and survival never left him.

Trebah Gardens: A Lifelong Project

In the 1980s, Hibbert and his wife Eira purchased Trebah, a semi-wild garden in Cornwall, with the simple intention of restoring it and selling it on. What began as a short-term plan blossomed into a decades-long passion. The Hibberts poured their energy into bringing the gardens back to life, uncovering hidden paths, exotic plants, and water features that had been choked by neglect.

Their work transformed Trebah into one of Cornwall's most celebrated gardens, attracting thousands of visitors every year. It became not just a horticultural triumph but also a living memorial—its beach had once been an embarkation point for American troops bound for Omaha Beach in 1944, a poignant link to the very war that had shaped Hibbert's life. In 1949, Hibbert married Eira Bradshaw, and together they built a large

and close-knit family. They raised four children and later took in their niece and nephew after a tragic family accident. Hibbert's household was bustling with life, laughter, and stories—many of them about a time when their father had parachuted into history.

Despite his often commanding personality, those who knew him best described him as charismatic, persuasive, and endlessly driven. He had a gift for inspiring others, whether leading men in battle or persuading locals to join in the restoration of Trebah.

In later years, Hibbert often returned to the Netherlands, not only for commemorations but to personally thank the Dutch families and resistance members who had risked everything to save him and his comrades. He never forgot the price they paid. This sense of responsibility led him to one of the most symbolic acts of his life: in 2009, he donated his Military Cross to the Airborne Museum at Oosterbeek, explaining that it belonged as much to the Dutch people as it did to him.

Eira passed away in 2009, after nearly sixty years of marriage. Hibbert continued to live at Trebah, surrounded by the beauty they had created and the family they had raised. He spent his final years as an elder statesman of both the garden and the airborne brotherhood, a man who had lived through history and left his mark on it.

On 12 October 2014, Tony Hibbert died peacefully at home, sitting in his favorite chair and surrounded by family. He was 96 years old. To the end, he remained a figure of energy, determination, and vision—a soldier, innovator, and gardener whose life stretched from the mud of Arnhem to the calm of Cornish gardens.

His daughter Gill described him as *“incredibly frustrating”* yet deeply magnetic:

“He was a very charismatic person ... He just had this way of taking people along and getting people to do things.”

Photos taken in the Netherlands



**To add to this story or add your own family history,
click the logo button below and
complete an upload form.**

