

= John Capper =

Major @-@ General Sir John Edward Capper KCB KCVO ( 7 December 1861 ? 24 May 1955 ) was a senior officer of the British Army during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who served on the North @-@ West Frontier of British India , in South Africa and during the First World War , where he was instrumental in the development of the tank .

An experienced engineer , Capper was involved in numerous building projects during his years in India and pioneered the development of airships in Britain . He helped establish and command several military training establishments in Britain , was involved in large @-@ scale military planning during 1918 and 1919 and was pivotal in establishing the tank as an important feature of the British Army . Although Capper was sometimes described as pompous and possessing poor communication skills , earning the nickname Stone Age for his attitude towards the ideas of junior officers in the Royal Tank Corps , he nevertheless played a vital role in the development and deployment of armoured vehicles in the British Army .

= = India , Burma and South Africa = =

John Capper was born in Lucknow , India to civil servant William Copeland Capper and his wife Sarah in December 1861 . Returning to England at an early age for education , Capper attended Wellington College and upon leaving in 1880 enrolled in the Royal Military Academy , Woolwich from where he went on to study at the School of Military Engineering at Chatham , before subsequently being commissioned into the Royal Engineers as a lieutenant . A capable engineering officer , Capper served in India and Burma for most of the first 17 years of his career , principally employed on military and public construction projects . He performed well in this position , being promoted to captain in 1889 .

In 1897 , Capper was attached to the force dispatched to the Tirah Campaign on the North @-@ West Frontier of British India . One of his tasks there was to supervise the construction of the first road for wheeled vehicles across the Khyber pass . At the campaign 's successful conclusion , he was promoted to major and transferred to South Africa while his wife Edith Mary ( neé Beausire ) and their son John Beausire Copeland Capper returned to England . Arriving in South Africa at the outbreak of the Second Boer War , Capper became deputy assistant director of railways , a vital job given the lengthy and dangerous supply routes along which the war was fought . In 1900 , he received the brevet rank of lieutenant colonel and commanded several locally raised units , eventually becoming the commandant at Johannesburg . He returned to England in June 1902 , following the end of hostilities the previous month , and on 31 October 1902 was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Bath ( CB ) .

= = Aeronautics = =

In 1903 he settled with his family at Bramdean House in Alresford , and was appointed Commander of the Balloon Sections , based at Aldershot under the command of Col James Templer . In 1906 , having briefly become the Balloon Companies , the organisation became the School of Ballooning with Capper as its Commandant . At about the same time the Balloon Factory was split off and moved to a new site nearby at Farnborough and , on Templer 's retirement , Capper also became its Superintendent and was given the brevet rank of full colonel . Templer was retained at the factory under Capper to complete the development Britain 's first military airship , the Nulli Secundus ( " second to none " ) in a purpose @-@ built airship shed .

Capper not only supervised the British Army 's ballooning and airship activities , but took a wider interest in aeronautics . In anticipation of the new airship , he took up the civilian sport of ballooning , flying in competitions initially as assistant to the Hon. C.S. Rolls and later with his own balloon " Pegasus " and his wife as assistant . These included the man @-@ lifting " war kites " developed by Samuel Franklin Cody and the early work on aeroplanes by both Cody and J. W. Dunne . He also conducted fact @-@ finding visits to the USA , where he and his wife befriended the Wright brothers

and became involved in protracted but ultimately futile negotiations for the War Office to buy a Wright machine .

Capper and Cody undertook the first successful flight of a British airship , the Nulli Secundus , over London in 1907 .

Capper went on to modify the airship as Nulli Secundus II , parodied by Punch as " second to none the second " , and a smaller experimental airship called Baby . Neither was an immediate success , although Baby would later be modified and have a long and successful career .

Capper oversaw the first Army aeroplanes . He briefly flew Dunne 's first glider , the D.1 , during secret trials at Blair Atholl in Scotland in 1907 . The flight had lasted only a few seconds when the glider crashed into a wall , with Capper sustaining a cut to the head . The next year , Cody flew the first British @-@ built aeroplane at Farnborough , which earned it the title British Army Aeroplane No.1. This was an ironic achievement for Capper 's command , as he had pinned his personal hopes on Dunne , whose D.4 achieved no more than a few hops .

That Autumn the government conducted a formal Inquiry into military aviation . Capper had to return early from Blair Atholl in order to present his evidence . He argued strongly for a promising future of all forms of aeronautics and especially the aeroplane . However his Army superiors on the committee were against aeronautics in any form . It was decided that only small @-@ scale airship experiments should continue and that aeroplane work should be stopped . It formally ceased when Dunne and Cody 's contracts ran out at the end of March 1909 .

Soon afterwards the Balloon Factory was removed from the command of the Army and a new civilian superintendent , Mervyn O 'Gorman , appointed . Capper remained in command of the Army Balloon School .

When Dunne left Farnborough , Capper was one of several friends who offered support for his efforts . In 1911 , one of Dunne 's new aeroplanes was exhibited at the Olympia Aero Show , with a placard stating it was " Built to the order of Col. J. E. Capper , R.E. " .

In 1910 Capper was transferred to command of the Royal School of Military Engineering at Chatham , marking the end of his aeronautical career .

= = First World War = =

Capper remained at Chatham until September 1914 when the lack of experienced officers forced his transfer to France in the early months of the First World War .

As a brigadier @-@ general , Capper was first made deputy inspector of the lines of communication before being given the post of Chief Engineer to the Third Corps . In July 1915 he was promoted to major @-@ general and made chief engineer of the British Third Army . In October , following the deaths of several senior officers at the Battle of Loos , including Capper 's younger brother Major @-@ General Sir Thompson Capper , he was promoted to overall command of the 24th Division . Capper remained in command of the division for the next 18 months , including periods of heavy fighting at the Battle of the Somme , in which his son John was killed in action serving with the Royal Artillery . The division also spent extensive periods of time in other sections of the line and gained extensive battle experience at the cost of high casualties . As a reward for his service in command of the division , he was presented with the Commander 's Cross of the Légion d 'honneur by the French government .

In May 1917 , he was recalled to England , initially to run the Machine @-@ Gun Corps training centre and from 28 July hold the position of Director @-@ General of the newly formed Tank Corps at the War Office . Operational command of tanks at the frontlines was in the hands of Hugh Elles , the first commander of the Heavy Branch . Although tanks had first been introduced on the Somme the year before , their design and manufacture were both inadequate and the tactics of their deployment almost non @-@ existent . Capper 's job at the Tank Corps was to shape the organisation of the unit into an efficient battlefield force , improve mechanical reliability and develop effective tactics . It was in this role that Capper was given the nickname Stone Age , as his subordinates considered him to be unwilling to accept new innovations in tank tactics . In fact , Capper was an able tactician who worked with General J. F. C. Fuller to develop a plan for a large

scale armoured assault on German lines in 1919 ( known as Plan 1919 ) : his subordinates ' prejudices were based on Capper 's rigid adherence to the military hierarchy and his consequent failure to communicate his ideas to those below his rank . For his services as Director General of the Tank Corps , Capper was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath .

= = Retirement = =

In July 1918 , Capper left the War Office and commanded the 64th Division in England until May 1919 , when he took over command of Number 1 Area in France and Flanders . In September 1919 , Capper became Lieutenant @-@ Governor of Guernsey and took over command of the island 's military installations . He held the post for five years and during that time was made Colonel @-@ Commandant of the Royal Tank Corps . On 11 July 1921 , he was made a Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order . Retiring in 1925 , Capper remained associated with the Tank Corps and also became a governor of Wellington College , associations he retained until 1946 .

During the Second World War , Capper joined the Hampshire Home Guard and remained on duty with the unit until 1943 . Post @-@ War he retired fully to Bramdean House and remained there until shortly before his death . He was widowed in 1953 and died at Esperance Nursing Home in Eastbourne in May 1955 , leaving a daughter . In 1971 , his collected papers , and those of his brother Thompson , who had been an instructor at the Staff College , Camberley , were donated to the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives at King 's College London where they are still available to researchers .