

Canadian Military History

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 5

1-20-2012

“Kangaroos at War”: the History of the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment

John R. Grodzinski
Royal Military College of Canada

Recommended Citation

Grodzinski, John R. (1995) “Kangaroos at War”: the History of the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment,” *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol4/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

"Kangaroos at War"

The History of the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment

John R. Grodzinski

The Second World War witnessed the development and large scale use of many new weapons: aircraft, armoured vehicles, communications systems and rockets are but a few. An equally important revolution occurred in tactics, where all armies had to learn how to integrate and use these systems in battle.

One innovation was the means by which infantry was moved across the battlefield. The previous method of advancing in the open, "leaning into the barrage" had proven too costly. Too many casualties were suffered, leading to an attack bogging down, early commitment of reserves or a complete change of plan before the enemy's defences had been penetrated.

The solution to this problem was to create a method of moving infantry across the battlefield under armoured protection. This finally came about during the battle of Normandy in July and August 1944, when "the first really effective armoured infantry vehicle appeared...during the operations of II Canadian Corps in Normandy."¹ Other armies had developed infantry carriers with a limited degree of protection, but none had the additional protection armour could give. This article will provide a brief history of the formation, organization and operations of the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment in 1944 and 1945. This important Canadian development changed the method by which 21st Army Group fought its battles.

The bitter experience of Operation "Spring" convinced Lieutenant-General Simonds, the commander of II Canadian Corps, that a tactical innovation was needed to bring sufficient combat force onto an objective. The practice of infantry

marching in the open or being carried on vehicles with limited protection had to change.² Simonds had studied this problem in 1938³ and in 1944 found a solution in employing discarded armoured vehicles modified to carry infantry. He ordered the Priest self-propelled guns recently turned in by the artillery regiments of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division to be converted to infantry carriers.

On 31 July 1944, Brigadier CM. Grant, the Deputy Director of Mechanical Engineering at Headquarters, 1st Canadian Army, ordered the establishment of an organization to convert 72 Priests to carriers by 9 August, the start date of Operation "Totalize." No sooner was this instruction given than the start date for "Totalize" advanced; the vehicles were now to be ready by 6 August, with as many completed on the 5th as possible.

The task of converting the Priests was given to Major G.A. Wiggan and his Advanced Workshop Depot (AWD). The modifications included the removal of the 105 mm gun, mount and mantelet (which led to the sobriquet "defrocked Priests," later replaced by "Kangaroos"), overhauling the radial engine, checking the serviceability of the transmission and the controlled differential brake lining and running gear. Normally the latter task alone was a seven-day operation! Armour plate was placed over the gun mantelet opening and added to the vehicle sides.⁴ The modifications also had to allow for the quick conversion of the Priests back to their previous configuration. The codename assigned to the conversion operation was "Kangaroo." Altogether, 14 British and Canadian units would contribute to this process.



A column of "defrocked Priests" carrying troops of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade line up in preparation for Operation "Totalize," 7 August 1944. (NAC PA 129172)

"AWD Kangaroo" established itself in two fields near Bayeux on 2 August. By that evening 14 vehicles had been stripped. Armour plate was obtained from a "help-yourself" park of "W" Crocks (tanks beyond repair); mild plate was found south of Caen and also cut from landing craft stranded on the Normandy beaches. Although a work schedule had been made, most of the maintainers found themselves working around the clock. By 2000 hours on 5 August, 72 carriers had been completed and six more were ready by noon on the 6th,⁵ although Stacey states that a total of 76 were ready by the 6th.⁶

Drivers for the carriers were drawn from the three artillery regiments of the 3rd Canadian Division and from Canadian armoured regiments. Training commenced immediately. Drills for mounting, dismounting and movement had to be developed, taught and practised.

For Operation "Totalize," the lead brigades of the assault were carried by the Defrocked Priests:

4th Infantry Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division
The Royal Regiment of Canada
The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry
The Essex Scottish Regiment

154th Brigade, 51st Highland Division
1st Battalion, The Black Watch
7th Battalion, The Black Watch
7th Battalion, The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders

Phase 1 of "Totalize" was an outstanding success. The carriers proved they could get infantry forward with comparatively fewer casualties. A comparison of the casualties suffered by seven of the Canadian infantry battalions involved offers some interesting results from the "Kangaroos" first operation:

MOUNTED:

Royal Regiment of Canada,
3 killed, 25 wounded

Royal Hamilton Light Infantry,
1 killed, 14 wounded

Essex Scottish Regiment,
3 killed, 7 wounded

MARCHING:

Cameron Highlanders of Canada,
30 killed, 96 wounded

Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal,
8 killed, 17 wounded

South Saskatchewan Regiment,
16 killed, 42 wounded

Calgary Highlanders,
14 killed, 37 wounded

Although these figures are not conclusive, the protection offered by the carriers reduced the casualties suffered en route to an objective and got the infantry there quicker than on foot. On dismount the carriers ensured that an adequate force was available for the final assault. However, they did not replace the skill and bravery required of the individual rifleman on that final assault.

Simonds was so delighted by the performance of the carriers in Operation "Tractable," that he pressed for the formation of a unit to carry the infantry into battle. As a result, on 28 August 1944, the 1st Armoured Carrier Squadron was

formed. The establishment was four troops each with 25 carriers, but only 55 Priests were available. Personnel included an officer commanding, four troop officers and 100 drivers. Each carrier had a .50-inch Browning machine gun and was crewed by a vehicle commander and driver.⁷ Approximately 60 per cent of the vehicles were equipped with radios. The squadron was attached to the 25th Canadian Armoured Delivery Regiment (The Elgin Regiment) for administration. The nickname "Kangaroo Squadron," suggesting empouched infantry, now stuck.⁸

The squadron was immediately involved in three operations. The first, Operation "Astonia," the capture of Le Havre, involved carrying a brigade from the 51st Highland Division from 10-12 September 1944. It was followed by Operation "Wellhit," against Boulogne with troops from the 9th Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division. Finally in late September and early October, Operation "Undergo" saw the 7th and 8th Brigades of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division in action at Calais.

The Priests, now worn by continual operations, were withdrawn and replaced by the

A Ram Kangaroo. Fully laden, the vehicle weighed 55,000 pounds. Its maximum speed was 25 miles per hour with fuel consumption of one mile per gallon. The driver's visor is open. A .30-inch Browning machine gun is on the cupola. Vehicle markings include the 79th Armoured Division crest on the centre of the vehicle and the unit tactical sign "157" on left fender. (Author's collection)



Canadian designed and built Ram tank, which had been relegated as a tank trainer following the adoption of the Sherman as the Canadian main battle tank. The demand for armoured vehicles for artillery forward observation officers and gun tractors resulted in the Ram finding new life in these roles. By removing the turret and making other modifications, the Ram could also be made into an armoured personnel carrier. The Ram carrier could accommodate 11 infantry along with a crew of two. Armament consisted of one .30-inch Browning machine gun.

The Rams were drawn at Pierreval, France where they had been driven from the Normandy beaches. Each troop was given sixteen "tanks."

The first operation with the Ram involved clearing the port of Antwerp, beginning with an assault against the heavily defended city of s'Hertogenbosch on 23 October 1944. Eleven other assaults followed after which the squadron was released to regroup at Tilburg. Altogether, it had supported some 30 lifts.⁹

Meanwhile, 21st Army Group concluded that the 1st Armoured Carrier Squadron offered the best method to reduce infantry casualties and seize objectives. It was decided to form two armoured personnel carrier regiments, one for each army. Both would belong to the 79th Armoured Division and operate with either the 1st Canadian or 2nd British Armies as required. The 79th Armoured Division was a British formation that provided specialized equipment in support of all operations. The British unit was designated the 49th Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment and the other was the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment, the only Canadian regiment in the division.

The 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment was formed in Holland on 24 October 1944. Regimental Headquarters was at Antwerp. Although the 1st Armoured Carrier Squadron was the foundation of the new regiment, it continued operations. From 25-30 October, the squadron supported 51st (Highland) Division at Oisterijk, Tilburg and Gertrudenburg. The squadron also managed to obtain more carriers and by 29 October, it had a total of 59 on strength.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the other elements of the regiment were being organized. Lieutenant-Colonel G.M. Churchill, formerly of the 25th and 10th Canadian Armoured Regiments, was named commanding officer. Warrant Officer 1 Langlois was appointed as Regimental Sergeant Major; he had served with the original carrier squadron. Additional personnel were drawn from other Canadian armoured regiments and units in Northwest Europe. Stores were obtained from Bayeux. The regiment was to be operational by 8 November 1944.

The regiment had two squadrons, each with four troops. A squadron had 52 Rams and could carry an infantry battalion. The regimental establishment is shown on the accompanying chart, although this was modified several times. A headquarters squadron, providing logistic support was added later. The British APC regiment had a similar organization.

An important part of the regiment was the maintenance organization, 123 Light Aid Detachment, Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. 123 LAD was formed on an ad hoc basis in August 1944 to service Kangaroos. Commanded by Captain E. Duncan, its personnel came from the light aid detachments of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division. When the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment was formed, the LAD became an integral part of the regiment and had a strength of 52 personnel.¹¹

By November, both carrier squadrons were organized. During the month, 23 officers and 663 other ranks joined the regiment as did the remaining fighting and administrative vehicles. On 18 November, tac signs were painted onto the vehicles, consisting of the number 157 in white on a horizontally divided green and blue square.

Throughout December, training, maintenance and inspections continued. A second vehicle marking, an orange kangaroo on a black circle was authorised by the commanding officer on 18 December. The orange and black colours represented the regiment's association with the Netherlands. Finally on 21 December, the regiment was assigned to the 31st Armoured Brigade of the 79th Armoured Division. Preparation for a number of operations that were



Ram Kangaroos in Action.

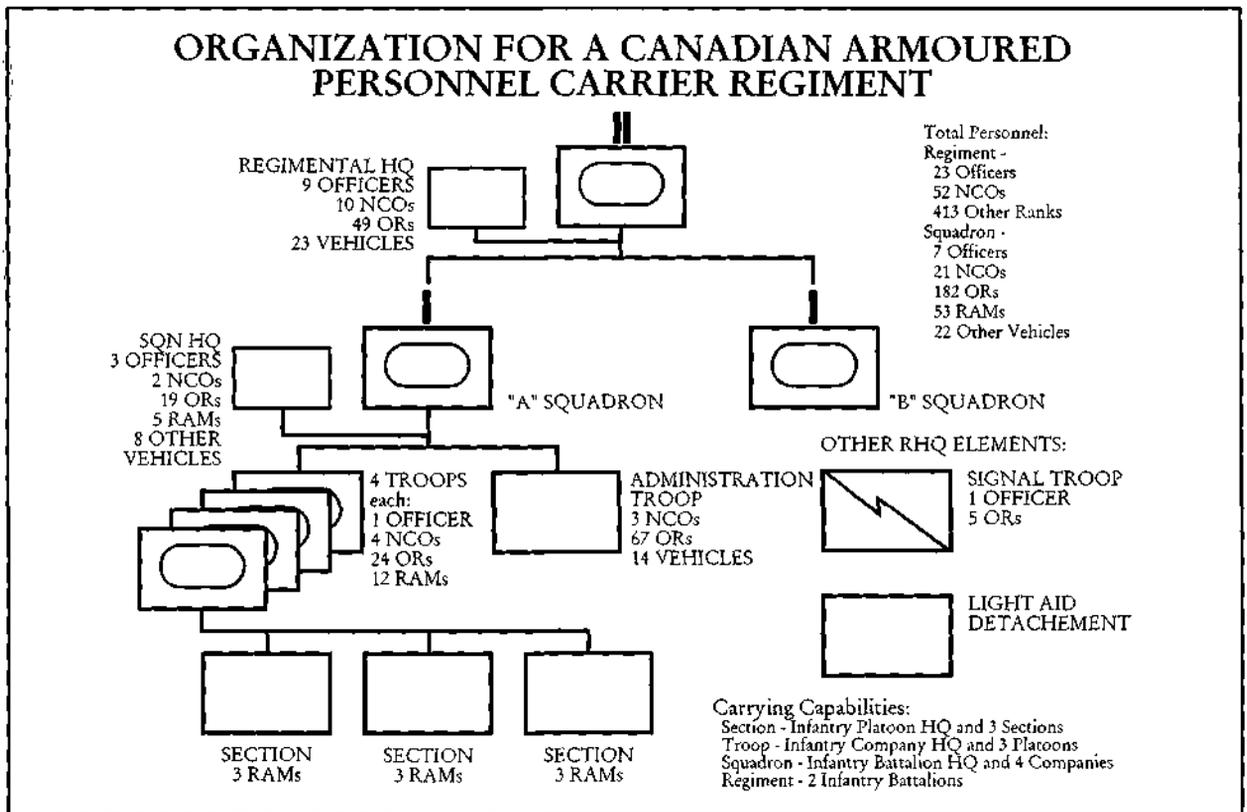
Left: Soldiers of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders being rushed forward in convoys of Kangaroos, 11 April 1945.

(NAC PA 159250)

Below: Personnel of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry advancing to Groningen, Holland, 13 April 1945.

(NAC PA 130937)





cancelled and conduct of vital point security completed the Kangaroo's year.

The new year commenced with familiarization training with the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade. A move to Watersheide was completed by 12 January. The pace then increased and decentralized squadron and troop operations became the norm.

On 16 January, two troops of "B" Squadron were assigned to carry British infantry in Operation "Blackcock." The remaining two troops were employed as a mobile command post and tactical headquarters for the 155th Brigade of the 52nd (Lowland) Division. "A" Squadron supported the 43rd (Wessex) Division attack on Straeton. Eventually the regiment carried every battalion of the division for "Blackcock."

During the latter part of January, the entire fighting echelon of the regiment was on German soil, making it the first Canadian unit to operate there. The month ended with maintenance and reorganization. Several new officers were posted in. At the end of the month, "A" Squadron's

vehicles were sent to workshops for a major overhaul.

It was also in January that the commanding officer appeared wearing the regiment's new cap badge. This was a representation of a kangaroo standing upright, with the motto "*Armatos Fundit*" beneath. The badges were produced by Mssr. Gaunt in Birmingham and issued to the troops on 5 February along with cloth regimental titles.¹² Lieutenant-Colonel Churchill had fought hard to obtain these to help foster regimental *esprit de corps*.

On 29 January, preliminary orders were received for Operation "Veritable," the clearing of the area between the Maas and Rhine rivers. Regimental headquarters and "A" Squadron were assigned to support the 44th Brigade of the 15th (Scottish) Division and to carry engineers that would breach the Siegfried Line. "B" Squadron would remain under the command of 30th Armoured Brigade. On 5 February, "A" Squadron moved to Nijmegen for the start of "Veritable." Twenty-nine days of almost continual action now faced the regiment.

"Veritable" began on 8 February and on the 15th, "A" Squadron was assigned to support the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division. The Royal Winnipeg Rifles were carried in a thrust along the Cleve-Calcar road. "B" Squadron also moved up, ready to support the 3rd Division. During the assault on Heinsburg, three miles west of Cleve, Trooper William Seymour of "A" Squadron, single-handedly captured 35 German soldiers following a brief dismounted skirmish. Meanwhile, Sergeant Joseph Bois remained with his carrier after it had been completely disabled by an 88 mm shot. He continued to engage the enemy with the Ram's machine gun and send reports to squadron headquarters. After being ordered to abandon this vehicle, he got into another Kangaroo and again gave effective fire support and assistance in evacuating casualties. Bois would later earn the Military Medal for this and other actions.¹³ On the 20th the regiment was placed in reserve.

The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada and the South Saskatchewan Regiment were carried south of Calcar on 26 February. When the attack commenced, the officer commanding "A" Squadron, Major Corbeau, was wounded and the commanding officer of the Highlanders, Lieutenant-Colonel Thompson was killed by a sniper. The next day was spent resting and on 28 February, the regiment moved to Udem and was placed in support of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division and the 11th Armoured Division.

March was another month of almost continual action. On 26 March, "B" Squadron carried 25-pounder artillery ammunition across the Rhine via the London Bridge, while "A" Squadron followed in reserve. "B" Squadron then carried two different battalions into action on 29 and 30 March.

In April, the Kangaroos worked with the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, 2nd Canadian Infantry Division and the 43rd (Wessex) Division. On 5 April, while No. 2 Troop of "A" Squadron was loading the 5th Wiltshires, they started their engines and immediately drew enemy fire. Trooper Seymour, whom we met earlier, could not get his vehicle's engine started. He climbed out, and for fifteen minutes was exposed to enemy fire while making the necessary repairs. This

action and that of 9 February, earned Seymour the Military Medal.¹⁴

On 12 April, Lieutenant Curtis Black, the 1 Troop Leader in "A" Squadron, was carrying "A" Company of the Royal Regiment of Canada. The attack was on a bridge, road and railway junction northeast of the town of Assen, Holland. Black led his troop in a daring dash from the start point, through two villages giving fire that was so effective that the enemy was unable to man their heavy weapons. On reaching the objective, Black saw a second bridge a few hundred yards away. Despite being covered by heavy fire, he led his troop across the bridge and dropped infantry on the other side. This action ultimately sped up the advance of the Royal Regiment of Canada and for his leadership and bravery, Lieutenant Black was awarded the Military Cross.¹⁵ By the end of the month, both squadrons were again in reserve.

On 4 May, while "A" Squadron was preparing to carry Le Regiment de Maisonneuve, news of a pending ceasefire came. This was confirmed on 5 May. Operations continued that day but the vehicle's weapons were unloaded and the breaches left open.

On 8 May, the conclusion to hostilities was announced and on 11 May, the final parade of the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment was held.

The 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment and its predecessors were involved in operations from Normandy to Germany. It was born as an ad hoc unit to overcome a tactical deficiency hindering the British and Canadian armies. The success of this Canadian innovation quickly led to the creation of two regiments dedicated to transporting infantry across the battlefield under armour protection. Ultimately the Kangaroos saved the lives of many of the infantry they carried and contributed to the success of many operations.

The regiment suffered 13 personnel killed in action and four dead from wounds. Its personnel received three Distinguished Service Orders, two Military Crosses, and four Military Medals. Perhaps the best epithet to the Regiment comes from the citation of the commanding officer's Distinguished Service Order:

...1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment...was the outcome of the use of degunned Priests that had such outstanding success with Canadians on op "TOTALIZE" and later at Falaise, Le Havre and Calais as armoured infantry carriers, known generally as "Kangaroos."

Lt Col Churchill within the space of slightly more than two months, from the time the regiment was authorised until committed to action, formed from the nucleus of one squadron, a regiment of fine standard. The splendid spirit engendered in the unit and the excellent standard of training achieved in such a short time was an outstanding accomplishment.

Early in January [1945] [the regiment] was ordered to support an attack on Wanssum Wood. This position had been unsuccessfully attacked in battalion strength on two occasions. Ground and weather conditions were extreme...Lt Col Churchill launched his Kangaroos into the attack at first light in a blinding snowstorm. The infantry were placed on the objective without a casualty...

On Op "BLACKCOCK" this unit carried every regiment in the 43 (Brit) Division. It took place in Jan...Weather and ground conditions were again appalling...

During the campaign this young regiment carried some 54 different infantry battalions into battle and was largely responsible for the success of many operations...



Lieutenant-Colonel Gordon Minto Churchill, D.S.O., Commanding Officer 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment. Churchill fought in the First World War (1917-1919) and in 1925 was commissioned into the Manitoba Horse. When that regiment was disbanded in 1936, he joined the Fort Garry Horse. Prior to commanding the Kangaroos, his war service included time with the 25th Armoured Delivery Regiment (The Elgin Regiment) and the 10th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Fort Garry Horse). On his beret is the badge for the Kangaroos.

Notes

1. R.P. Hunnicut, *Sherman: A History of the American Medium Tank* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1978), p.486.
2. Dominick Graham, *The Price of Command: A Biography of General Guy Simonds* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 136-37.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
4. Colonel M. Johnston, *Canada's Craftsmen: The Story of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and of the Land Ordnance Engineering Branch* (LORE Association, 1984), p.64.
5. *Ibid.*, p.65.
6. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe*. Volume III of the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of the Stationary, 1960), p.210.
7. Unknown, *1st Canadian Armoured Carrier Regiment: The History of the Kangaroos* (Holland: Smit Hengelo, 1945?), pp.4-5.
8. *Ibid.*, p.5.
9. *Ibid.*, p.8.
10. War Diary-1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment, October 1944. Hereafter the narrative is based on the War Diary.
11. Johnston, p.80.
12. War Diary, January 1945.
13. Award Citations Trooper Seymour and Sergeant Bois.
14. Award Citation Trooper Seymour.
15. Award Citation Lieutenant Black.

John R. Grodzinski is a Staff Officer at Land Force Atlantic Area, Halifax. He is the Executive Secretary of the Army Museum at the Halifax Citadel.