

FOLLOW THE CHARGING BISONS: THE XII MANITOBA DRAGOONS
FROM NORMANDY TO THE LEOPOLD

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Military History

by

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ABSTRACT

FOLLOW THE CHARGING BISONS: THE XII MANITOBA DRAGOONS FROM NORMANDY TO THE LEOPOLD CANAL, by Major Cameron Meikle, 125 pages.

In May 1941, the Canadian military mobilized the XII Manitoba Dragoons, activating this Non-Permanent Active Militia unit. This started a series of events that, when examined, revealed an unexplored challenge within World War II Canadian Army leadership, discovered a heretofore unrecognized influencer within the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps' history, and illuminated a unit that has not yet received the attention it deserves. This study examines the actions of the XII Manitoba Dragoons, the II Canadian Corps' reconnaissance unit, from its arrival in Normandy in July 1944 until the Canadian advance was stalled eleven weeks later. With Canadian Army officers lacking an understanding of corps-level reconnaissance, the II Canadian Corps initially underutilized the Dragoons. Fortunately, the Regiment's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel James Allen Roberts, emerged as the corps' expert in armoured car regiment tactics and, primarily through his initiative, integrated and optimized the employment of the Dragoons into operations. Through this transformation, it demonstrated that, despite a lack of historical study or analysis of this unit, this Regiment directly enabled Canadian commander's decision-making, increased the rate of advance of Canadian troops, and II Canadian Corps leaders saw the Dragoons' contributions equal to that of units three times its size. Undoubtedly, the XII Manitoba Dragoons were critical to II Canadian Corps operations.

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Finally, and deserving of her own paragraph, I must thank my wife and number one supporter, Isabelle Cyr. These words cannot equal your contributions. Without your sacrifices that allowed me to dedicate the time necessary for this paper, which I greatly underestimated on its onset, I would have quit this project long ago. Thank you for, as always, your continued support through the challenges forced upon you as a military spouse.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reconnaissance requires a great deal of individual initiative, quick thinking, and courage, particularly the latter. One, two, or three armoured car troops, thrusting forward to find the enemy, usually without supporting weapons and troops, are under a nervous strain that cannot be compared with that faced by infantry and tanks.

—LTC P.C.R. Black, CO XII Manitoba Dragoons, quoted in C. E. Henry, *Regimental History of the 18th Armoured Car Regiment*

By 17 September 1944, the XII Manitoba Dragoons established a series of observation posts along the Leopold Canal in northern Belgium, halted by German forces at the Scheldt Estuary.¹ This marked the end of a three-month period that was transformational for not only the Dragoons but also for Canadian armoured reconnaissance history.² This study will examine the actions of the XII Manitoba Dragoons, the II Canadian Corps' reconnaissance unit, from its arrival in Normandy in July 1944 until the Canadian advance stalled eleven weeks later. With Canadian army officers lacking an understanding of corps-level reconnaissance, the II Canadian Corps initially underutilized the Dragoons. Fortunately, the Regiment's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel James Allen Roberts, emerged as the corps' leading expert in armoured car regiment tactics and, primarily through his initiative, integrated and

¹ The XII Manitoba Dragoons underwent a series of name changes after mobilization, ultimately called the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons) for the majority of World War II. For simplicity, this paper will use XII Manitoba Dragoons to refer to the unit throughout this paper despite its wartime designations.

² As the term “armour” appears repeatedly in Canadian unit names, the Canadian spelling of “armour” will be used throughout this paper.

optimized the employment of the Dragoons into operations.³ Examining this transformation will show how the XII Manitoba Dragoons were critical to II Canadian Corps operations.

While several historians have detailed the successes and failures of the II Canadian Corps, the activities of Canadian reconnaissance units, particularly the Manitoba Dragoons, are not investigated beyond survey history. Yet, as will become clear over the following chapters, this Regiment directly enabled Canadian commanders' decision-making, increased the rate of advance of Canadian troops, and II Canadian Corps leaders saw the Dragoons' contributions as equal to that of brigades. A unit of this significance primarily glanced over in academic study is noteworthy as it highlights the extent of undiscovered lessons that remain in Canada's military past. By exploring the Dragoons' operations, this paper will also illuminate the associated challenges of studying reconnaissance operations, promoting further investigation into this underexplored subject.

When examining the actions of the XII Manitoba Dragoons in northwest Europe, it is apparent that II Canadian Corps leaders lacked an understanding of the optimal employment of an armoured car regiment. This is not an attack on these leaders. Rather, it underscores the challenges of integrating new capabilities into military operations, as was the situation with armoured reconnaissance during World War II. With the emergence of the tank at the end of the Great War, traditional horse-based cavalry units

³ Canadian armoured units use cavalry terminology for describing unit size. As a result, a Canadian armoured regiment is a battalion-sized organization, a squadron equal to a company, and finally a troop the equivalent of a platoon.

were transitioning into mechanized organizations.⁴ As a result, Western armies experimented with their newly formed mechanized reconnaissance organizations, learning hard lessons through combat.

The Canadian Army lacked time to experiment and gain experience with armoured forces before the onset of the War. Consequently, with the Canadian Armoured Corps only established in August 1940, Canadian officers with any armoured experience were rare.⁵ Other than one tank battalion, formed and then quickly disbanded at the end of the First World War, Canada did not establish its first tank units until 1936. Further, it took two more years before these units received their first tanks.⁶ Unsurprisingly, few Canadian Army officers possessed a sound understanding of armoured tactics, and even fewer were conversant on the employment of armoured reconnaissance.⁷ This knowledge

⁴ John K. Marteinson and Michael R. McNorgan, *The Royal Canadian Armoured Corps: An Illustrated History* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Robin Brass Studio, 2000), 68.

⁵ Memorandum on the Conversion of 4th Canadian Division into an Armoured Division, 18 December 1941, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, "General Staff War Diary," January 1942-December 1942, RG24, C3, vol. 13787, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787); Roman Jarymowycz, *Tank Tactics: From Normandy to Lorraine* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 75-77.

⁶ Royal Canadian Armoured Corps Pamphlet, August 1945, 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), "War Diary," September-December 1945, RG24, C3, vol. 14250, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as XII MD War Diary, vol. 14250).

⁷ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 92, 122; Memo to Convert 4th Division, 18 December 1941, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

gap becomes apparent when the XII Manitoba Dragoons' actions in the summer of 1944 are explored.

Once the Canadian Army had enough soldiers to form two corps, the XII Manitoba Dragoons, also referred to after mobilization as the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), were assigned to II Canadian Corps as its reconnaissance element.⁸ With no Canadian and limited British doctrine for armoured car regiments to guide the unit's training or procedures, Canadian reconnaissance units developed their tactics through trial and error.⁹ For the Dragoons, its primary doctrinal guide was *the employment of an armoured car regiment*, written by Lieutenant-Colonel James Roberts, the unit's commanding officer for the period of this paper.¹⁰

Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts assumed command of the XII Manitoba Dragoons on 28 August 1943. Roberts was a militia officer before the Second World War, who, in 1941, joined the Royal Canadian Dragoons. This unit was the armoured car regiment for the 5th Canadian Division and ultimately became the I Canadian Corps' reconnaissance

⁸ Explained in the second chapter of this paper, immediately upon mobilization the XII Manitoba Dragoons were known as the 18th (Manitoba) Reconnaissance Battalion. However, after several role and corresponding name changes, the unit is finally designated the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons). It retained this name throughout the war; The 1st Armoured Car Regiment (The Royal Canadian Dragoons) were the I Canadian Corps' reconnaissance element.

⁹ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 104, 115; Peter Kasurak, "Infantry Fighting Vehicle or Battle Taxi? Canadian Infantry's Struggle with Mechanization," *Canadian Military Journal*, no. 1 (2021): 14, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/PDFs/CMJ221Ep14.pdf>.

¹⁰ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 127; Although there are many references to this document, and documented amendments exist, no copy of this publication has been found.

unit.¹¹ For two years, Roberts trained in armoured tactics with this Regiment comprised primarily of Permanent Force soldiers and officers, eventually becoming the unit's second-in-command. In May of 1943, the XII Manitoba Dragoons needed a second-in-command to become the commanding officer in short order, as the incumbent was due for promotion.¹² Roberts was selected for this position and became commanding officer three months later.

Although possessing only two years of experience as an armour officer, Roberts quickly became a subject matter expert for an armoured car regiment due to his passion for tactics. In August 1943, he completed a doctrine-like handbook on armoured car regiment employment. This book represented the lessons he amassed during training, including several specialized courses in England, becoming the official tactical guide for both Canadian corps' reconnaissance units.¹³ During operations in northwest Europe, the Manitoba Dragoons' employment broadens through Roberts' influence, transforming the Regiment into an essential component of the II Canadian Corps. Studying the Dragoons' actions will demonstrate that Robert was a seminal figure within his corps and Canadian armoured reconnaissance history.

¹¹ Government of Canada, "The Royal Canadian Dragoons: Official Lineage of the Royal Canadian Dragoons Armour Regiment," Government of Canada, last modified 6 December 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/official-military-history-lineages/lineages/armour-regiments/royal-canadian-dragoons.html>.

¹² James Alan Roberts, *The Canadian Summer: The Memoirs of James Alan Roberts* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Bookroom, 1981), 40.

¹³ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 127; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 43.

Literature Review

While many historians have written about the First Canadian Army and the II Canadian Corps in northwest Europe, published works only provide a cursory look at the activities of the XII Manitoba Dragoons. Although most significant publications mention the Regiment, comments are generally limited to the unit's location without focusing on tasks or activities. Further, there are no documents whose sole focus is Canadian reconnaissance. The Regiment published an official history immediately following the Second World War entitled *Regimental History of the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons)* by Charles Henry, a regimental officer.¹⁴ However, the book's purpose was to provide an immediate record of the Regiment's operations, which is admittedly not exhaustive. This document is primarily a more digestible form of the unit's war diary that lacks an explanation of "the why" or how the Regiment's actions contributed to the II Canadian Corps.

The second most detailed work on the Regiment is a memoir written by James Roberts, the commanding officer for the XII Manitoba Dragoons during the operations covered in this paper.¹⁵ While the book details his entire life, Roberts provides incredible insights into the Regiment during World War II. However, the author only highlights items that he finds personally interesting, resulting in no single focus to his book. Despite Roberts' passion for tactics and reconnaissance, as this is not the aim of his memoir, a

¹⁴ C. E. Henry, *Regimental History of the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons)* (Nederlandsche Diepdruk Inrichting, 1945).

¹⁵ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*.

complete history of the Regiment or how its actions affected corps operations is not detailed.

The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945 by Colonel C.P. Stacey is volume three of the Canadian Army's Official History of the Second World War.¹⁶ Stacey provides an excellent overview of the operations completed by the First Canadian Army from 1944-1945, well suited for the general reader to get an appreciation of the events that occurred throughout the war. Although the XII Manitoba Dragoons is mentioned 13 times in the 821-page book, there is little analysis or detail on the Regiment's activities. This is not a criticism, as Stacey himself wrote that he intended to leave specific matters to corps and regimental historians due to the scale of the war. However, this leaves the detailed history of the XII Manitoba Dragoons unexplored.

Mark Zuehlke explores the operations detailed in this paper over three books in his Canadian Battle Series.¹⁷ Zuehlke asserts that his books are the first significant works dedicated to Canadian operations for this period of the war. The author provides an excellent survey of events from the breakout of Normandy to the winter of 1944-1945. Still, despite the XII Manitoba Dragoons' actions throughout this period, the Regiment is

¹⁶ Colonel C. P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (British Columbia, Canada: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1960).

¹⁷ Mark Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno: First Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign, July 4-August 21, 1944* (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013); Mark Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory: First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign: September 13 - November 6, 1944* (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007); Mark Zuehlke, *Forgotten Victory: First Canadian Army and the Cruel Winter of 1944-45* (Madeira Park, British Columbia, Canada: Douglas & McIntyre, 2015).

mentioned only four times throughout these books. The repeated lack of analysis on the XII Manitoba Dragoons or the employment of Canadian reconnaissance is addressed by Dr. Roman Jarymowycz in an article for the *Canadian Military Journal*.¹⁸ He highlights that the II Canadian Corps has long been deprived of critical operational analysis, perhaps due to the technical complexities and lack of understanding of armoured warfare at the tactical and operational levels. As a result, he attempts to explain the armoured operations during Operation Totalize.¹⁹ Unfortunately, despite highlighting the lack of reconnaissance tasks in this operation, he does not investigate this issue or the XII Manitoba Dragoons.

A book that adequately outlines the Dragoons' actions is *the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps: An Illustrated History*, published in cooperation with the Canadian War Museum.²⁰ This work provides detailed information on the formation of the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps and outlines all major World War II operations. Although the Manitoba Dragoons are featured throughout this book, due to its broad focus, reference to the unit does not exceed a brief description of their actions.

Finally, a Canadian World War II paper must mention books by Terry Copp and Tim Cook. Again, both *Cinderella Army* and *Fight to the Finish* are outstanding works on Canadian history but fall short of detailing the influence of reconnaissance operations or

¹⁸ Roman Jarymowycz, "Canadian Armour in Normandy: Operation 'Totalize' and the Quest for Operational Manoeuvre," *Canadian Military History* 7, no. 2 (1998): 19-40, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol7/iss2/3/>.

¹⁹ Operation Totalize was a Canadian operation that occurred from 7-11 August 1944 south of Caen. It will be discussed further in chapter 3.

²⁰ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*.

the actions of the XII Manitoba Dragoons.²¹ With this historical knowledge gap evident through the review of relevant published material, this paper will begin to address this issue.

Role of an Armoured Car Regiment

To determine if the XII Manitoba Dragoons enabled II Canadian Corps operations during the war, understanding how an armoured car regiment was employed is essential. Noting that doctrine is not automatically an appropriate metric to determine a unit's successful employment, it is a good starting point for discussion. As Canada belonged to what can be considered a British Imperial military alliance, the Canadian Army followed British doctrine to ease integration into this force.²² In 1943, Britain published its first guidelines on armoured reconnaissance, which stated that armoured car regiments were units constituted for reconnaissance.²³

Information is essential to make a plan and execute it successfully.²⁴ Accordingly, leaders assign units reconnaissance tasks to provide detailed information on the enemy and the terrain to support decision-making. In 1943, Canada designated reconnaissance

²¹ Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2007); Tim Cook, *Fight to the Finish: Canadians in the Second World War, 1944-1945* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Penguin Canada, 2016).

²² Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 65; Kasurak, "Infantry Fighting Vehicle or Battle Taxi?," 14.

²³ Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Military Training Pamphlet (MTP) No. 60, *The Tactical Employment of Armoured Car and Reconnaissance Regiments: Part 1-General Principles* (London: The War Office, 1943), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

units to provide either medium or close reconnaissance.²⁵ Doctrine defined medium reconnaissance as an information collection task conducted on a wide frontage up to 50 miles ahead of the formation's main body.²⁶ Close reconnaissance was information collected on a division's frontage, generally at least 10 but no more than 20 miles in front of the formation's main body. Following the war, Canadian leaders indicated that the doctrinal definitions of close and medium reconnaissance led to considerable misunderstanding.²⁷ The lack of detail in these terms left tactical execution, other than distance, to each commander's interpretation. Therefore, a closer look at Canadian army officers' comprehension of these terms is required to understand the envisioned employment for an armoured car regiment. With II Canadian Corps leaders lacking armoured reconnaissance expertise, seeking the XII Manitoba Dragoons' understanding is most appropriate.

A questionnaire sent to all 21st Army Group reconnaissance units in December 1944 provides insight into how the XII Manitoba Dragoons understood its role.²⁸ The

²⁵ 18th (Manitoba) Armoured Car Regiment Troop Training Directive, 7 October 1942, 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), "War Diary," May 1942-October 1943, RG24, C3, vol. 14247, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247).

²⁶ Chief of the Imperial General Staff, MTP 60, Part 1, 9.

²⁷ Canadian Army Headquarters (CAHQ), Canadian Army Manual of Training (CAMT) 3-2, *The Armoured Car Regiment* (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Army, 1948), 6.

²⁸ The 21st Army Group, under which the First Canadian Army was assigned, wanted modifications to its divisional reconnaissance regiments, but refrained from changes until the existing organizations were trialed in combat. By December 1944, the Army Group determined it had sufficient combat experience and distributed a

Dragoons' commanding officer, Major Pat Black, wrote the purpose of medium reconnaissance was to obtain general information about the enemy's movements and dispositions on which a commander can make a plan of offensive or defensive action. Black's definition of close reconnaissance was obtaining detailed information on the ground and the enemy's strength and movement.²⁹ Although he argues that medium reconnaissance is a misleading term and that a one-size-fits-all approach to corps, division, and brigade reconnaissance does not work, his interpretation of the differences in types of reconnaissance is subtle yet clear.³⁰ Medium reconnaissance is to obtain broad information on the enemy and ground to support higher-level formation planning. Close reconnaissance requires detailed information to take specific action against an enemy threat. Neither the doctrinal definition nor the XII Manitoba Dragoons explanation is precise. That said, it is clear that an effective reconnaissance unit provides information on the enemy and ground to the level of detail required of the commander to whom the reconnaissance organization is supporting.

questionnaire to their reconnaissance units to obtain data for discussion at an upcoming War Office Standardization Conference.

²⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons Response to 21st Army Group's Reconnaissance Unit Organization Questionnaire, December 1944, 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), "War Diary," November 1943-January 1945, RG24, C3, vol. 14248, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248).

³⁰ Major Black argued that medium reconnaissance tactics varied significantly depending on if the enemy is in an established defensive position vice withdrawing away from friendly forces.

Although the terms may have created some confusion, doctrine creators had a purpose for specifying reconnaissance as medium or close-unit tactics and organization varied significantly between these two tasks. First, for medium reconnaissance, as these units operated upwards of 50 miles in front of their formations, they had to be highly mobile to cover these distances. In addition, they needed sufficient communications abilities to report their findings to their higher headquarters over this span.³¹ In contrast, close reconnaissance units did not need to be as mobile or possess the same degree of communications due to operating closer to their parent formation. However, getting detailed information on the enemy required the necessary armament and protection to probe and press the enemy to force them, if necessary, to disclose their positions.³²

Reconnaissance units also had different requirements based on the echelon they supported. In October 1942, the First Canadian Army headquarters reviewed the organization of its armoured formations.³³ This working group concluded that the corps would be responsible for medium reconnaissance, which an armoured car regiment should execute. Further, they determined that an armoured division required a tracked reconnaissance unit to match its mobility, which they called an armoured reconnaissance

³¹ 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade's Response to 21st Army Group's Reconnaissance Unit Organization Questionnaire, December 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; The commander of 8th Brigade was the commanding officer of the XII Manitoba Dragoons from 28 August 1943-28 October 1944.

³² Chief of the Imperial General Staff, MTP 60, Part 1, 10.

³³ Historical Section, Canadian Military Headquarters (CAHQ), Report No. 168, *Organization of First Canadian Army* (Ottawa: Government of Canada Publications, December 1946), 9, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/cah/militaryhistory/dhh/reports/cmhq-reports/cmhq168.pdf>.

regiment.³⁴ Finally, infantry divisions kept their existing reconnaissance regiments based on armoured cars and personnel carriers. The primary task of these units was to provide early warning to advance guard and main body forces as a form of protection.³⁵ With the naming convention lacking variance, Figure 1 displays these organizations by echelon.

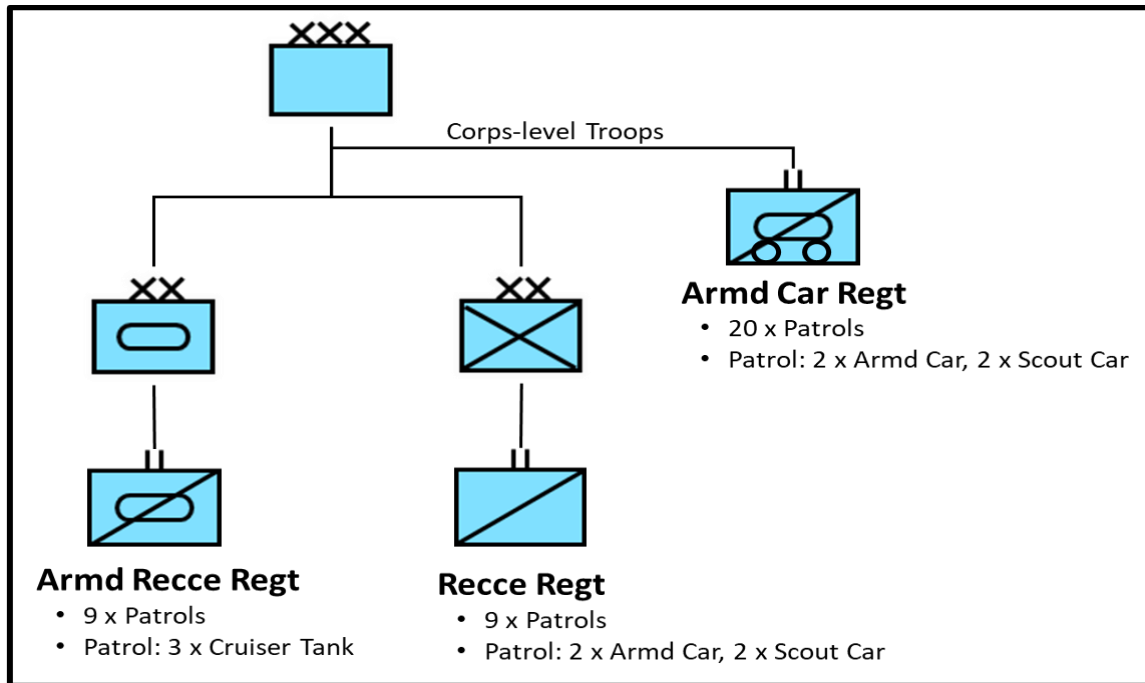


Figure 1. Canadian Reconnaissance Unit Types by Echelon

Source: Created by author using Historical Section (G.S.), Army Headquarters, Report No. 57, *A Summary of Major Changes in Army Organization, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Government of Canada Publications, December 1952), 8, https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/mdn-dnd/D63-5-57-1952-eng.pdf; Canadian Army Headquarters, Canadian Army Manual of Training 3-2, *The Armoured Car Regiment* (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Army, 1948), 21.

³⁴ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 168, 29.

³⁵ 4th Canadian Division's Tactical Exercise Without Troops No. 1, 25 January 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

On 11 January 1943, the Canadian Army reorganized itself based on the British war establishments to facilitate cooperation between British and Canadian formations.³⁶ With this organizational adjustment creating change, the Canadian Army took this opportunity to implement the October working group's recommendations and formed all three types of reconnaissance units: the armoured car regiment, the armoured reconnaissance regiment, and the reconnaissance regiment.³⁷ As an armoured car regiment, the XII Manitoba Dragoons' became a corps-level reconnaissance unit, assigned to the II Canadian Corps.³⁸ Its optimal task was medium reconnaissance, which suited the Regiment due to its long-range mobility and designated equipment for extended communications. However, these positive attributes came at a cost. This unit was generally confined to movement on roads and its vehicles only lightly armed.³⁹ Consequently, while the Dragoons were prepared to fight for information, its armament was designed for self-protection, not offensive action.⁴⁰

Following the Canadian Army's reorganization in January 1943, the Canadian Military General Headquarters conducted an exercise to discuss the employment and interaction between the armoured car regiments and divisional reconnaissance units.⁴¹

³⁶ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 57, 8.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Martenson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 127.

³⁹ CAHQ, CAMT 3-2, 4.

⁴⁰ Chief of the Imperial General Staff, MTP 60, Part 1, 9.

⁴¹ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 11 February 1943, II Canadian Corps, "G Branch War Diary," January 1943-November 1943, RG24, C17, vol. 13710, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021,

The result of this activity saw the XII Manitoba Dragoons assigned several core tasks. The Regiment was to conduct medium reconnaissance, harass enemy lines of communication, protect friendly lines of communication, seize and hold terrain (with augmentation), delay the enemy during a withdrawal, and perform special tasks as needed by the corps commander.⁴²

These tasks were appropriate for a highly mobile and lightly armed unit to execute. However, they provide our first insights into the infancy of armoured reconnaissance employment. The primary task identified above for offensive operations is medium reconnaissance. Yet, there is no role should the battlefield not allow for this task to occur. For example, immediately following the landings in Normandy, the short distance between the front lines of enemy and friendly troops did not permit this type of reconnaissance. Consequently, Canadian officers initially struggled to employ the Regiment as the envisioned tasks during pre-war training did not match the battlefield they experienced.

Up to this point, several concepts have been introduced to frame subsequent discussion. First, the XII Manitoba Dragoons were the II Canadian Corps' reconnaissance element during World War II, and its actions have been mainly glanced over in historical study. Second, the Dragoons were an armoured car regiment, a lightly armed yet highly mobile unit designed for medium reconnaissance. Finally, during the pre-war exercises to

https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13710).

⁴² XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 15 February 1943, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

develop the operating concept for an armoured car regiment, an employment gap was identified. When the battlefield did not support medium reconnaissance during offensive operations, it was unclear how the Canadian corps envisioned the Regiment's actions. This is the first hint into Canadian Army officers' lack of understanding of this newly formed unit. Through this framework, the XII Manitoba Dragoons' efforts will be evaluated from its initial break out from Normandy to the winter of 1944 when German forces stalled the Canadian advance at the Scheldt Estuary. After this examination, it will be apparent that the Regiment's actions were critical to II Canadian Corps' operations.

CHAPTER 2

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

None of the Staff have experience in Armoured Corps work, but it is doubtful if any Staff Officers with experience are available in the Canadian Army.

—Major-General L. F. Page, G.O.C. 4th Canadian Division, Memo to Convert 4th Division, 18 December 1941, 4th CAD War Diary

The Dragoons experienced several challenges upon mobilization and during its pre-war training. First, the unit's doctrinal purpose changed three times, necessitating retraining, while the Regiment was simultaneously defending the Canadian coast from possible Japanese attack. This, combined with a lack of understanding of armoured operations by Canadian Army officers, led to several commanding officers' firings for inadequately preparing the Dragoons. Once in England, the Regiment addressed the shortfalls in doctrine by finalizing its structure through exercises and working groups. Finally, the First Canadian Army underwent several changes that affected the Dragoons' employment in northwest Europe. Specifically, the unit received a new commanding officer, the II Canadian Corps lost an expert in armoured operations, and General Montgomery repurposed armoured divisions' reconnaissance elements. With these issues resolved or mitigated, the Dragoons were ready to test their skills on the battlefields in France.

Mobilization Challenges

At the onset of World War II, the XII Manitoba Dragoons were the senior cavalry regiment in Western Canada. Its regimental lineage originates in 1885 in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, when the 95th Battalion Manitoba Grenadiers was formed in response

to the Riel Rebellion.⁴³ Although disbanded in 1892, one sub-unit was retained as an independent company and eventually formed part of the original Regiment.⁴⁴ The XII Manitoba Dragoons was formed on 1 July 1903 as a reserve force regiment. This unit participated in most major Canadian battles during the First World War, from Ypres in 1915 to Amiens in 1918. Following the Great War, the Regiment moved to Minnedosa, Manitoba, where it remained without significant change until the Second World War. On 17 May 1941, the Canadian military merged three Non-Permanent Active Militia units to create the reconnaissance element for the 4th Canadian Infantry Division.⁴⁵ As a result, the XII Manitoba Dragoons, the Manitoba Mounted Rifles, and the 2nd Armoured Car Regiment amalgamated and became the 18th (Manitoba) Reconnaissance Battalion.⁴⁶

On 27 January 1942, after realizing the increased importance of armoured forces, Canada's War Committee converted the 4th Canadian Infantry Division to create a second Canadian armoured division.⁴⁷ Accordingly, the Dragoons became an armoured car regiment as this was the type of reconnaissance unit allocated to a Canadian armoured division in 1942. This again resulted in a name change for the Regiment, now called the

⁴³ The Staghound no. 21, 19 May 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁴⁴ "12th Manitoba Dragoons: Official Lineage of XII Manitoba Dragoons Armour Regiment," Government of Canada, last modified 18 October 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/official-military-history-lineages/lineages/armour-regiments/12th-manitoba-dragoons.html#fn1>.

⁴⁵ The Staghound no. 21, 19 May 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁴⁶ "12th Manitoba Dragoons," Government of Canada.

⁴⁷ Government of Canada Radiotelegraph, "General Service Directive 186", 27 January 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

18th (Manitoba) Armoured Car Regiment.⁴⁸ Following the stand-up of the First Canadian Army and the creation of the I and II Canadian Corps a year later, the Regiment's role changed for the last time to a corps reconnaissance unit. Correspondingly, the unit's name changed to the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), a designation it retained for the remainder of the war.⁴⁹

During this evolution and only six months after its mobilization, the Regiment received its first operational task in December 1941. The Dragoons surveilled the coastline on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, to provide early warning for potential Japanese landings.⁵⁰ Squadrons rotated through this patrolling task while the Regiment conducted soldier skills training. After the 4th Canadian Division converted to an armoured formation, the Dragoons retained this operational responsibility for several months despite its need for retraining.

The change of role of the Dragoons from supporting an infantry to an armoured division required the learning of new tactics and procedures. Unfortunately, like most Canadian Army officers, the Dragoons did not possess the knowledge or experience to thoroughly understand the differences in supporting an armoured division. Further, with

⁴⁸ 4th Canadian Division Conference Notes, "Discuss the Conversation of 4 Cdn Div to 4 Cdn Armd Div", 16 January 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

⁴⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 15 February 1943, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁵⁰ 18th (Manitoba) Armoured Car Regiment Operation Order 4, 16 February 1942, 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), "War Diary," May 1941-April 1942, RG24, C3, vol. 14246, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021. https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700.

an operational task to complete, the Regiment was not entirely dedicated to retraining. With these two challenges, the Dragoons' transition from an infantry division to an armoured division's reconnaissance element, as will be demonstrated, was inadequate during the initial months of this conversion.

After the Dragoons' coastal defense task concluded, it joined the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, where its commander, Major-General F.F. Worthington, inspected the Regiment. General Worthington was an influential figure in Canadian armour development, having instructed at the Royal Tank School in Bovington, England, and serving as the commandant of the Canadian Armoured Fighting Vehicle School.⁵¹ He is still known as "the father of the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps" and was one of the rare Canadian Army officers with experience in armoured operations.⁵² His inspection included all training aspects, including physical fitness, marksmanship, driving abilities, and maintenance.

Worthington's assessment of the Dragoons was unfavorable, stating that he was very dissatisfied with the Regiment's performance and that the many excuses for the poor showing were unacceptable.⁵³ The Regiment attempted to address these issues, but

⁵¹ Larry Worthington, *Worthy* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 147, 150.

⁵² Murray Brewster, "Worthington," *Legion – Canada's Military History Magazine*, September 2020, <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2020/09/worthington/>.

⁵³ F. F. Worthington, "Report on Inspection of the 18 (MAN) Armd C Regt," 3 June 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

complained about a lack of vehicles and equipment to conduct training.⁵⁴ With the division preparing to deploy overseas two weeks later, Worthington performed a final inspection of the unit on 5 August 1942 and saw no improvement. Consequently, the following day he replaced the Dragoon's commanding officer with Lieutenant-Colonel J.S. McMahon, the Brigade Major for the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade.⁵⁵ This firing shocked the Regiment, who departed for England two weeks later.

Removal of commanders was not rare during World War II. In fact, General Worthington was removed from command of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division before it entered the war.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, removing the Dragoons' commanding officer further demonstrates the lack of understanding of armour operations within the Canadian Army. Despite the change in role to support the more mobile, quicker moving armoured formation, the Dragoons did not change its training and fell short during the unit's inspection. Further evidence of this shortfall occurred in January 1943. Lieutenant-Colonel McMahon, who replaced the previously fired commanding officer, was also removed because, according to his replacement, he "had not a clue, [and] no trades training."⁵⁷ At the onset of World War II, Canadian officers struggled to grasp the

⁵⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 1 August 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁵⁵ 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary Entry, 6 February 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 15 August 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁵⁶ Brewster, "Worthington."

⁵⁷ Jack Granastein, "Successful Command Lieutenant-General Robert Moncel on Wartime Leaders," *Canadian Military History* 22, no. 2 (2013): 77,

employment and corresponding training for armoured reconnaissance operations. The cause of this deficiency was primarily insufficient training and lack of experience in this field.

Canadian Army leaders identified the lack of knowledge of armoured reconnaissance operations within its officer corps. To address this shortfall, a small number of Canadian officers were sent to British armoured units to obtain experience.⁵⁸ This program included a XII Manitoba Dragoons squadron commander, Major Collings, sent to England in March 1942 for training with armoured car regiments. Once the Dragoons arrived in England, Major Collings delivered several lectures to unit personnel on the latest lessons learned.⁵⁹ In addition, the Canadian Army brought British officers with armoured experience in North Africa to speak with Canadian leaders. One of these events occurred for the Dragoons. An officer from the Derbyshire Yeomanry Armoured Car Regiment, British First Army, held a professional development session on his recent operations in Tunisia.⁶⁰

The efforts by Canadian leaders to address the shortfall in armoured car regiment knowledge must be acknowledged. The Canadian Army attempted to remedy this deficiency while simultaneously addressing the many challenges of forming a new corps

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1690&context=cmh>.

⁵⁸ Jarymowycz, *Tank Tactics*, 77.

⁵⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 11 September 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁶⁰ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 10 May 1943, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

for combat operations. Unfortunately, as will be seen during the initial days of the Dragoons' employment in France, these actions were insufficient for II Canadian Corps leaders to understand the optimal employment of an armoured car regiment during all types of operations.

Organizational Structure Changes in England

On 22 August 1942, 36 officers and 726 other ranks set sail for England on the S.S. Letitia, arriving nine days later.⁶¹ Within a month, the Dragoons finalized its structure which remained unchanged throughout the war. The Regiment organized itself to include: a unit headquarters, a headquarters squadron, and four reconnaissance squadrons designated A, B, C, and D.⁶² While conducting operations, the Regimental headquarters comprised of just two armoured cars, one for the commanding officer and the other for the unit signals officer.⁶³ Headquarters Squadron consisted of a command group, communication troop, and administration troop. The communication troop provided long-range communications, manned by Royal Canadian Corps of Signals personnel. The administrative troop housed the quartermaster, transport officer, and technical officer, who coordinated the support for the unit.⁶⁴ On operations, the Regiment

⁶¹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 1 September 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁶² 18th Armoured Car Regiment Establishment, 10 September 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247.

⁶³ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 42.

⁶⁴ The technical officer was responsible for routine or service maintenance. They coordinated with the Light Aid Detachment who conducted first echelon repairs and

organized an ad hoc “A” echelon of trucks carrying supplies, medical personnel, fuel, and ammunition. These unarmed and unarmoured vehicles moved closely behind the fighting squadrons to provide timely support.

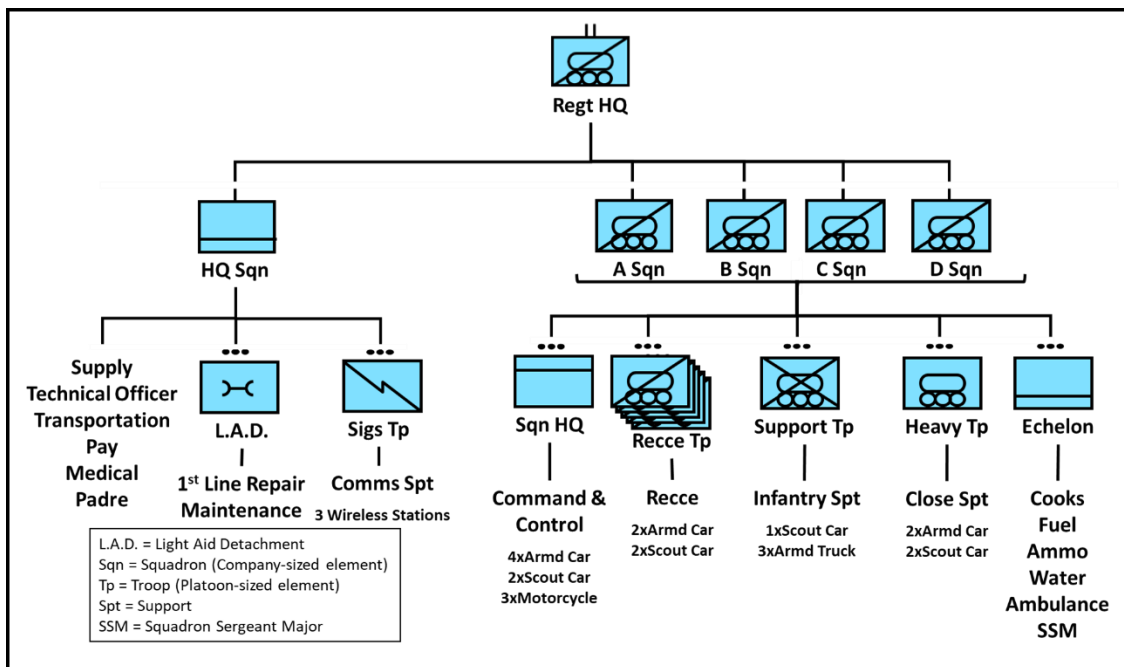


Figure 2. Organizational Wire Diagram of an Armoured Car Regiment

Source: Created by the author using 18th Armoured Car Regiment Establishment, 10 September 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247; Canadian Army Headquarters, Canadian Army Manual of Training 3-2, *The Armoured Car Regiment* (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Army, 1948), 23.

The four reconnaissance squadrons had nine troops and were organized to operate independently from the regiment. The headquarters provided command and control over all squadron elements. The support troop assisted the five reconnaissance troops by

operational maintenance; 4th Canadian Armoured Division Standing Order 1, “Light Aid Detachments,” 13 May 1942, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13787.

providing infantry support, finding dismounted patrols, and clearing roadblocks.⁶⁵ The heavy troop was designed to have armoured cars with larger, 75mm main guns to provide additional fire support to the squadron. However, these larger caliber cars were not available to the Dragoons until near the war's completion. Correspondingly, this troop was used as another reconnaissance troop.⁶⁶

The reconnaissance troops were centered around the "Staghound" armoured car made by General Motors in Pontiac, Michigan. This vehicle was operated by a crew of five personnel: the commander, the radio operator/loader, a gunner, a driver, and a spare driver. For armament, the Staghound had one 37mm cannon and three 7.62mm machine guns;⁶⁷ one in the turret which paralleled the main gun fired by the gunner, one used by the spare driver (also known as the bow gunner), and the third mounted outside of the turret as an anti-aircraft weapon.⁶⁸ It is clear from the war diaries that the soldiers of the XII Manitoba Dragoons thought highly of the Staghound. For example, in a war diary entry from later in the war, the unit described how "the German Army has already a very healthy respect for the Staghound, and its speed, size, and firepower have on many

⁶⁵ CAHQ, CAMT 3-2, 23.

⁶⁶ General Report of Operational Methods—France and Belgium: 8 July to 30 September 1944, 30 September 1944, XII War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁶⁷ Armored Car T17E1-Left Side View Staghound Description, 18th Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), "War Diary," February 1945-August 1945, RG24, C3, vol. 14249, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as XII MD War Diary, vol. 14249).

⁶⁸ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 42.

occasions thrown enemy infantry particularly into a state of panic.”⁶⁹ Further, there is no more indication of the admiration of this vehicle than when the Regiment began writing its unofficial bulletin; they gave it the title of “The Staghound.”

Although the Regiment structure was primarily unchanged throughout the war, the composition of the five reconnaissance troops within each squadron underwent several changes as military leaders better understood armoured reconnaissance. While in its divisional reconnaissance role, its tactics were fairly offensive-minded to obtain detailed information on the enemy, with larger troops consisting of eight vehicles.⁷⁰ However, following the creation of corps reconnaissance, the Canadian Forces General Headquarters conducted Exercise Clatter to discuss the organization and employment of the newly formed reconnaissance units.⁷¹ Further, the II Canadian Corps ordered the XII Manitoba Dragoons to conduct cloth model exercises to discuss differences and interactions between corps and divisional reconnaissance elements.⁷² These examinations concluded that each armoured car troop would consist of five vehicles: two armoured cars, two scout cars, and one motorcycle. After centralizing the motorcycles in the

⁶⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 16 November 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁷⁰ 18th (MB) ACR Troop Training Directive, 7 October 1942, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14247; This publication details how an armoured car would move forward to engage if contacted by enemy armoured cars, motorcycles, or reconnaissance tanks. They aim to only maintain contact with the enemy’s main body’s tanks.

⁷¹ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 11 February 1943, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13710.

⁷² II Canadian Corps Training Instruction No. 2: 1 May-31 Jul 43, 21 April 1943, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13710.

squadron's A echelon, the fighting troop's organization remained unchanged for the rest of the war: two armoured cars and two scout cars.⁷³

The organizational changes to the Dragoons before operations in northwest Europe were largely successful. Through the working groups and cloth model exercises, the Canadian Army developed an organizational structure that required no major changes throughout the war. The Regiment could cover a corps' frontage with its four squadrons, often allowing one squadron to remain in reserve as a brief reprieve to frontline duties. Further, the communication and logistical structure enabled the Regiment to travel the large distances required for medium reconnaissance. From an individual troop perspective, this small grouping allowed unit soldiers to maneuver on the battlefield at lower risk of detection, in vehicles that could withstand some enemy fire. In the end, the exercises in England properly structured the Dragoons for operations, improving its effectiveness once landing in France.

Changes within the First Canadian Army

The story of the First Canadian Army started in late 1941. By this time, the build-up of Canadian forces in England surpassed the ability of the corps headquarters established overseas to manage Canadian personnel. To address the increased numbers, the First Canadian Army was established on 6 April 1942, comprised of two corps.⁷⁴ In October 1943, I Canadian Corps was dispatched to the Mediterranean theatre, causing the

⁷³ Vehicles—XII Manitoba Dragoons, n.d., XII MD War Diary, vol. 14249.

⁷⁴ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 168, 3.

Canadian Army to be split for the Normandy campaign.⁷⁵ Still organic to the First Canadian Army, the II Canadian Corps consisted of the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. As previously highlighted, each infantry division had a reconnaissance regiment, the armoured division an armoured reconnaissance regiment, and the XII Manitoba Dragoons remained the armoured car regiment for II Canadian Corps.⁷⁶

Before operations in France, three changes within the First Canadian Army occurred that notably affected the Dragoons' operations. First, in August 1943, the Regiment's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Moncel, was selected for a position within the II Canadian Corps staff. This change resulted in the Regiment's second-in-command, James Roberts, being promoted and assuming this role. A rare Canadian officer with armoured car regiment experience, Roberts prepared the Regiment for corps-level reconnaissance. After identifying a need for more officers with reconnaissance training, Roberts worked with his previous unit, the Royal Canadian Dragoons, to transfer some of its experienced officers to his Regiment.⁷⁷ Further, he placed a renewed emphasis on his officers to learn armoured car tactics. He wrote and published an armoured car doctrine handbook and directed six tactical discussions to finalize unit operating procedures, including river crossings, maintaining contact with flanking units,

⁷⁵ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 30.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁷ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 40.

flank guard tasks, and reconnoitering towns.⁷⁸ These discussions would prove useful during the Regiment's operations in northwest Europe.

The second change that affected the Dragoons' operations resulted from cascading changes in corps leadership. On 28 January 1944, Commander II Canadian Corps resigned his position due to health concerns and was replaced by General Guy Simonds.⁷⁹ The new commander assessed his leaders and decided to remove General Worthington as the 4th Canadian Armoured Division commander. As mentioned previously, Worthington was one of Canada's leading armoured experts. With his removal, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts was left to fill the role of subject matter expert for armoured reconnaissance within the II Canadian Corps.

The last change came from the 21st Army Group Commander. General Montgomery decided that having more fighting units outweighed the importance of reconnaissance for an armoured division. As a result, he ordered all armoured reconnaissance regiments in the 21st Army Group to retain their names but convert to armour regiments.⁸⁰ The secondary effect of this change was that the XII Manitoba Dragoons often had to act, sometimes simultaneously to its corps-level tasks, as the 4th

⁷⁸ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 29 November 1943, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁷⁹ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 28 January 1944, II Canadian Corps, "G Branch War Diary," December 1943-July 1944, RG24, C17, vol. 13711, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13711).

⁸⁰ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 2 March 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13711.

Canadian Armoured Division's reconnaissance unit. This complicated the command relationship for the Dragoons and negated aspects of its pre-war training. For example, passing enemy contacts between corps and division elements was no longer required without a division reconnaissance unit. With these last command and organizational changes, the First Canadian Army had its final structure for the invasion and breakout of France.

Prior to operations in Normandy, the Dragoons endured several challenges. The results were a finalized organizational structure, and a commanding officer who possessed the expertise to address the knowledge gap on armoured reconnaissance operations within the II Canadian Corps. However, these positive outcomes stemmed from a turbulent path. With mechanized warfare in its infancy, the Dragoons' role changed three times, ultimately tasked as one of the first two mechanized corps reconnaissance units in Canadian history. These changes, coupled with inexperienced leaders, led to several commanding officers' firings and an initial lack of readiness for the unit. In addition, before departing England, the Dragoons faced another challenge when the 4th Canadian Armoured Division lost its reconnaissance element, leaving the Dragoons to fill this void. Despite these challenges, Regimental leadership prepared the unit for combat operations. Nevertheless, the true test of the Dragoons' ability to enable II Canadian Corps operations began on 7 July 1944 as it drove its Staghound armoured cars off the landing crafts and onto the sandy beaches of Normandy.

CHAPTER 3

THE OUTSKIRTS OF CAEN

The possibilities are immense; with 700 tanks loosed to the southeast of Caen, and armoured cars operating far ahead, anything may happen.

— General B. L. Montgomery, G.O.C. 21st Army Group,
quoted in COL C. P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*

The XII Manitoba Dragoons arrived in France on 8 and 9 July 1944, just in time to receive word that Canadian and British troops captured the city of Caen.⁸¹ Over the next three weeks, the Regiment received its first operational tasks in Europe and suffered its first casualties. Yet, it did not have an opportunity to prove its worth to the II Canadian Corps. With armoured reconnaissance still in its infancy, Canadian leaders did not appreciate the full extent of the Regiment's capabilities. Fortunately, the Dragoons' commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts, emerged as a change agent for the increased utilization of the Regiment. But, without penetrating the German defensive positions in July 1944, corps leaders did not see the utility of an armoured car regiment. The Regiment was either employed as poorly trained infantry or held in reserve awaiting an opportunity to pursue a retreating enemy. Although the tactical situation around Caen did not allow for medium reconnaissance, this narrow view of employment for an armoured car regiment made II Canadian Corps operations more challenging.

⁸¹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 162.

Fighting as Infantry around Caen

On 8 July 1944, as the first group of the XII Manitoba Dragoons landed on the beaches in France, the last elements of the II Canadian Corps' main command post also arrived and began their battlefield orientation.⁸² Up to this point, the Canadian units that participated in the Normandy landings were under the command of the Second British Army.⁸³ General Montgomery determined that until Allied forces expanded their bridgehead beyond Caen, there was insufficient room for the First Canadian Army Headquarters to be activated. Despite this view, the 21st Army Group required more soldiers as the Allies continued to enlarge the Normandy bridgehead. As a result, between 6 and 7 July 1944, the II Canadian Corps Headquarters and the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division were brought to France from England ahead of army troops.⁸⁴ As part of the corps-level troops, the XII Manitoba Dragoons also entered the conflict at this time. After several days of orientation, on 11 July 1944 at 1500 hours, the II Canadian Corps Headquarters became operational and assigned to the Second British Army. The

⁸² II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 8 July 1944, II Cdn Corps, vol. 13711.

⁸³ The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944.

⁸⁴ Historical Section, Canadian Military Headquarters (CAHQ), Report No. 146, *Operations of First Canadian Army in North-West Europe, 31 Jul-1 Oct 44 (Preliminary Report)* (Ottawa: Government of Canada Publications, October 1945), 2, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/reports/cmhq-reports/cmhq146.pdf>; II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 11 July 1944, II Cdn Corps, vol. 13711.

corps consisted of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, and 2nd Canadian Army Group, Royal Artillery.⁸⁵

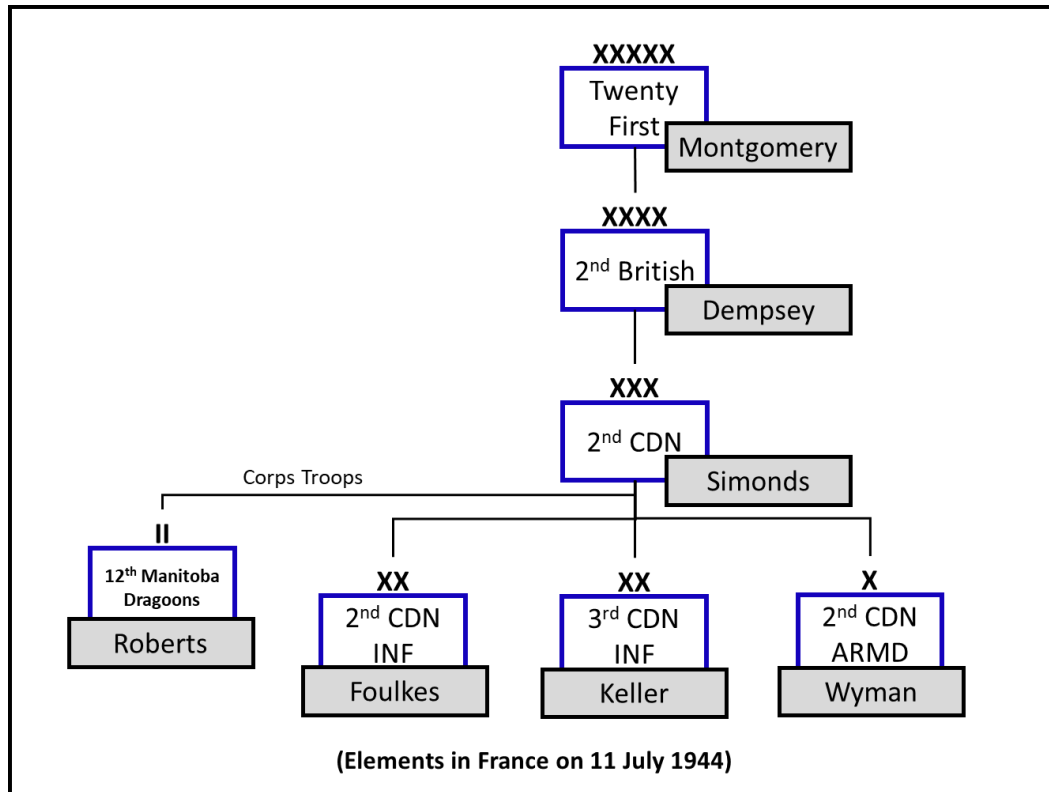


Figure 3. II Canadian Corps Elements in France, 11 July 1944

Source: Created by author.

Upon activation, the II Canadian Corps assumed responsibility for an approximately seven-kilometer front along the Orne River on the outskirts of Caen. Its task was to hold the sector and actively patrol the area with a view of establishing a

⁸⁵ Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 116; Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 104.

bridgehead across the river on a future date.⁸⁶ With the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division currently holding this line, it required replacing to rest and reorganize after participating in the seizure of Caen. The XII Manitoba Dragoons, as it had yet to participate in operations, was attached to the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division to assist with this task.

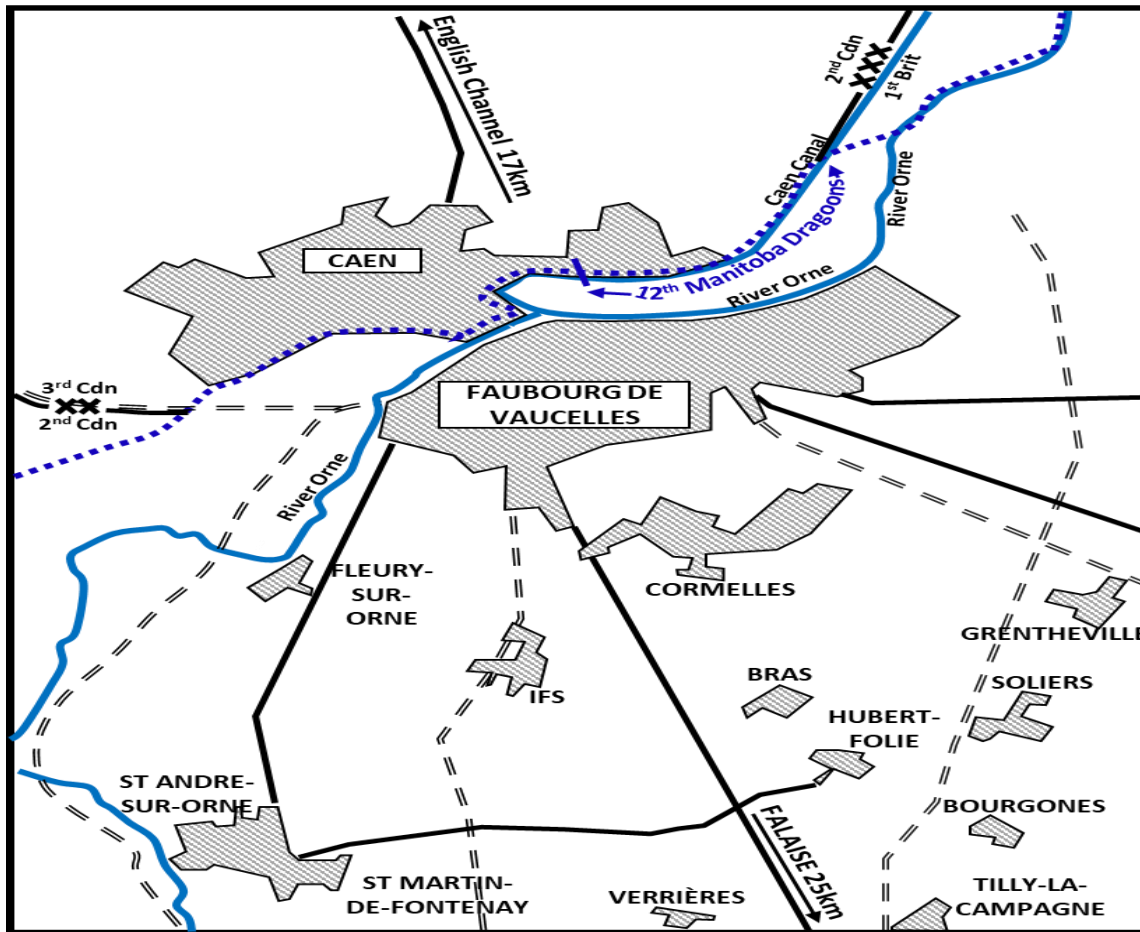


Figure 4. Map of Caen on 15 July 1944

Source: Created by author.

⁸⁶ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 11 July 1944, II Cdn Corps, vol. 13711.

The XII Manitoba Dragoons' first operational task in Europe was occupying a defensive line outside Caen, with Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts issuing Operation Order Number 1. His tasks to the Regiment were consistent with reconnaissance observation post tactics. He outlined the Regiment would conduct static fire positions and constantly man observation posts. Further, he directed that the unit would aggressively patrol.⁸⁷ After last light on 14 July 1944, the Regiment drove its armoured cars within half a mile of the defensive line, then disembarked its vehicles to move into its positions. The unit's 300 reconnaissance-trained personnel were organized into three makeshift infantry companies and covered a defensive line of over a thousand yards.⁸⁸ The enemy on the other side of the river observed this movement. Within 45 minutes of occupying its positions, the Regiment received its baptism of fire from 88mm artillery shells. Unfortunately, the Regiment suffered its first casualty when shrapnel from this artillery fire struck Trooper Colin MacNeill in the thigh and foot.⁸⁹

The Regiment remained in its infantry role along the Caen Canal for three days, receiving sporadic periods of shelling that lasted approximately 25 minutes at a time. At night, the squadrons dispatched patrols to verify several bridges and had numerous minor

⁸⁷ 18th Armoured Car Regiment Operation Order No 1, n.d., XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade Order-Relief of the 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade, 13 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁸⁸ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 13.

⁸⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 15 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

engagements with enemy reconnaissance patrols.⁹⁰ Although for just a short period, this battlefield inoculation ultimately served the Regiment well, as it was better prepared for combat stressors following this experience.

With pre-war organizational design and validation exercises focused on preparing the Dragoons for corps reconnaissance, several challenges emerged when employing the Regiment outside its intended role. First, the Dragoons were designed and equipped to operate from its vehicles and maintain contact with the enemy over large distances. As a result, the unit only possessed Wireless Set #19 radios designed for an armoured vehicle. It owned no Wireless Set #38 man-portable radios or field telephones required for dismounted operations.⁹¹ It was unlikely during the Dragoons' development that Canadian leaders envisioned the Regiment operating without its vehicles. Consequently, before the Dragoons could occupy a defensive line, landline wire had to be laid in its entirety, or the Regiment would have no means to communicate.

The second issue for an armoured car regiment in an infantry role was that its personnel were equipped to fight from their vehicles. Due to this, many Dragoons soldiers only had pistols, and the unit possessed no mortars or anti-tank guns.⁹² To mitigate this shortfall, the Regiment dismounted the bow gunner's machine gun to increase the unit's level of firepower. Still, the lack of dismounted and anti-tank weapons

⁹⁰ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 17 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

⁹¹ XII Manitoba Dragoons: Lessons Learned Whilst Acting in an Infantry Role, 25 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 63.

⁹² XII Manitoba Dragoons: Lessons Learned Whilst Acting in an Inf Role, 25 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

limited the unit's effectiveness to halt an enemy's advance.⁹³ Had the German Army conducted an armoured counter-attack into the Dragoons' position, the Regiment was not capable of providing significant resistance even while defending a considerable water obstacle.

Finally, an armoured car regiment required unique reconnaissance training, which took the Dragoons the previous two years to become effective.⁹⁴ This skill set did not exist within any other unit within the II Canadian corps. Thus, commanders had to carefully consider the risk of losing these specially trained soldiers when assigning armoured car personnel tasks outside their doctrinal role. Despite all of these factors, the XII Manitoba Dragoons were willing to act in this capacity to allow other friendly units time to re-group following periods of heavy fighting, as was the situation in July 1944, provided commanders considered the limitations and risks.⁹⁵

When resourced correctly, the XII Manitoba Dragoons would prove quite successful in economy of force operations. For these missions, a small unit maintains a frontage of a much larger force, freeing other organizations for consolidation, separate tasks, or rest.⁹⁶ As would be seen once the Regiment reached the Leopold Canal, an armoured car regiment was well resourced for this task. Its strong communication

⁹³ Henry, *Regimental History XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 13.

⁹⁴ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 63.

⁹⁵ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 28 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 110; At this point 21st Army Group had lost over 30,000 soldiers. Within the next two weeks, the senior psychiatrist for the 2nd British Army indicated there is an exhaustion crisis in some divisions.

⁹⁶ CAHQ, CAMT 3-2, 9.

abilities allowed for reconnaissance patrols to cover a large distance, and the mobility of its vehicles facilitated a mobile reserve to patrol and react to enemy attempting to infiltrate the Dragoons' lines. That said, an economy of force mission is different from the infantry defensive task the Regiment fulfilled around Caen. In this dismounted role, the Dragoons lacked the required equipment to complete this task adequately.

Dragoons Missing from Operations Atlantic and Spring

Before the XII Manitoba Dragoons occupied the defensive line on the outskirts of Caen, on 3 July 1944, the 1st United States Army launched an offensive on the western portion of the Allied line. Despite poor weather and challenging terrain, the American troops began to have success. As a result, the German Army started to move units westward to halt the American advance.⁹⁷ To prevent the Germans from repositioning, General Montgomery directed the Second British Army to attack south over the Orne River, drawing enemy formations away from the 1st United States Army's front.⁹⁸ Although forcing the Germans to remain in the eastern sector of the 21st Army Group's area of operations was the primary purpose, Montgomery was also clear he would exploit any breakthrough achieved during these operations.

⁹⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 164; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 133.

⁹⁸ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 168; II Canadian Corps Operation Instruction No 2: Operation Atlantic, 16 July 1944, II Canadian Corps, "G Branch War Diary," July 1944-August 1944, RG24, C17, vol. 13712, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712).

Montgomery's description of a breakthrough provided insight into his understanding of what an armoured car regiment brought to the battlefield. On 14 July 1944, when writing to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, he described that the possibilities for his upcoming operation were excellent with the 700 tanks in the vicinity of Caen and armoured cars conducting reconnaissance well ahead of the formations. Comments from the Second British Army commander echoed a similarly positive outlook of armoured car units. He directed the 8th British Corps that, while three armoured divisions would be required to fight and destroy the enemy, the armoured cars should push far to the south to spread alarm and determine the enemy's disposition.⁹⁹ These statements highlight that Montgomery and Dempsey believed an armoured car regiment was most successful when employed in a medium reconnaissance role, far in front of their formations. The idea of "anything can happen" is very telling. It suggests that when employing an armoured car regiment during offensive operations, Montgomery believed they could offer that critical piece of knowledge that could tip the scale in your favor on the battlefield.

Montgomery's plan to keep German forces away from the 1st United States Army's axis of advance focused on the 8th British Corps. His plan, set to begin on 18 July 1944, saw this corps conducting an offensive operation known as Operation Goodwood. To support the 8th British Corps' main attack south of Caen, the 1st British Corps on the left and the II Canadian Corps on the right would also attack south to

⁹⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 168.

expand the bridgehead beyond the city.¹⁰⁰ General Simonds, the II Canadian Corps Commander, issued his orders on 16 July 1944, under the name of Operation Atlantic.¹⁰¹ He tasked the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division to attack south of Caen simultaneously with the 1st and the 8th British Corps' attacks. In addition, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was directed to exploit south to the town of Verrières, approximately seven kilometers south of Caen, should the battlefield conditions provide this opportunity.¹⁰²

Although General Simonds' orders do not mention the XII Manitoba Dragoons, evidence indicates that the corps was preparing the Regiment if an exploitation opportunity presented itself during the operation. During the early morning hours of 18 July 1944, the XII Manitoba Dragoons withdrew from its defensive line. At H-hour for Operation Atlantic, the Regiment returned under the command of the II Canadian Corps, with the corps' operation log stating that the Dragoons were prepared to move on order from the commander.¹⁰³ The Regiment's war diary entry on 18 July 1944 further suggests this idea, describing how the Regiment directed rest for its personnel as they may be

¹⁰⁰ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 166-169; Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 123.

¹⁰¹ II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 16 July 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13711; II Canadian Corps Instruction No 2: Operation Atlantic, 16 July 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712.

¹⁰² II Canadian Corps Instruction No 2: Operation Atlantic, 16 July 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712, 2; Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 123.

¹⁰³ Situation Report No 23: Period up to 181200B, 18 July 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13711; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 16-17; Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 126; II Canadian Corps Operations Log, 17 July 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13711.

required to cross the Orne River that night and “function as they should, doing recce.”¹⁰⁴

Ultimately, a series of strong counter-attacks by the German Army prevented the II Canadian Corps from reaching its ultimate objective of Verrières. As neither Operation Goodwood nor Atlantic created a significant penetration, the Dragoons were not required in an exploitation role.

Although the corps did not use the Dragoons during Operation Atlantic, these events provide insight into the limited range of tasks that II Canadian Corps leaders believed suitable for an armoured car regiment. General Simonds’ actions of keeping the Dragoons in reserve, taken with the previous comments from Montgomery and Dempsey, indicates that all three of these leaders shared the same view of corps-level reconnaissance. They saw the primary purpose of the Regiment as medium reconnaissance, only used while the formation was advancing against a retreating enemy. As a result, commanders kept these units in reserve until an opportunity presented itself for an exploitation or medium reconnaissance role.¹⁰⁵ This narrow view minimized the Dragoons’ effectiveness and, as will be demonstrated, ultimately made the execution of the II Canadian Corps operations more difficult.

Operation Atlantic provides several examples where the XII Manitoba Dragoons could have positively influenced the II Canadian Corps’ operations had its employment

¹⁰⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 18 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁰⁵ Terry Copp believes that General Simonds saw the German defensive positions during Operation Atlantic as rear-guard positions, neither well prepared or with an enemy willing to stand and fight. This is what led to the decision to have limited reconnaissance prior to that attack; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 144; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 23 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

been different. First, there are several small examples in which increased reconnaissance would have created smoother operations. For instance, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division's start line was based only on map and aerial photo study, causing them to miss several houses and a 12-foot wall blocking its line of advance. Consequently, the entire Royal Regiment of Canada was forced to climb over this obstacle, delaying its start time.¹⁰⁶ A proper ground reconnaissance would have avoided this delay.

That said, there are two more significant examples where the corps could have used its reconnaissance element to aid its planning and execution. First, on 18 July 1944, the coordination between the 8th British Corps' main attack and the II Canadian Corps' operations was not explicit.¹⁰⁷ Reports from General Montgomery indicated that the 8th British Corps' operations were a complete success and that its reconnaissance elements had begun to conduct exploitation tasks. Unfortunately, this assessment proved optimistic and did not reflect reality. While it is unclear if the II Canadian Corps shared Montgomery's optimistic view of the 8th British Corps' operations, a flank protection task to the Dragoons would have ensured coordination between these formations and provided accurate information for Canadian planning. Second, on 20 July 1944, after General Dempsey ended Operation Goodwood, General Simonds ordered the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division to continue its advance south to capture the Verrières ridge—a be prepared to task during Operation Atlantic. However, intelligence on the German position was vague, and the XII Manitoba Dragoons, held in reserve, could not develop

¹⁰⁶ Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 139.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

the situation further. This resulted in Simonds assessing that the Germans were crippled after repelling the 8th British Corps during Operation Goodwood. Regrettably, his assessment was incorrect. The Germans blocked the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division's assault, inflicting heavy casualties on its four infantry regiments.¹⁰⁸

As the Second British Army could not penetrate German defenses in late July 1944 and commanders only saw the benefit of an armoured car regiment against a retreating enemy, the XII Manitoba Dragoons remained behind lead formations for thirteen days without an operational task. In subsequent operations after Atlantic, Canadian commanders continued to overlook the Regiment's utility in a flank protection or lines of communication security role, despite these functions being assigned to the Regiment as potential tasks during pre-war training in England. In these roles, an armoured car regiment could report the disposition of the friendly forces whose flanks or communication lines the unit was protecting. Even though keeping your higher headquarters apprised of your status is an individual formation's responsibility, in times of intense conflict or locations with poor signal transmission, redundancy of communication can be critical to the success of an operation. This fact was reinforced to the II Canadian Corps during its subsequent operation in July 1944.

Following Operation Atlantic, on 25 July 1944, the Dragoons remained in reserve while the II Canadian Corps conducted Operation Spring. This operation aimed to gain the territory that Operation Goodwood had failed to capture.¹⁰⁹ Further, Operation Spring

¹⁰⁸ Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 175.

¹⁰⁹ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 2; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 165.

prevented German forces from re-enforcing against the 1st United States Army's Operation Cobra, a major offensive operation to the west of the Second British Army.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, inadequate and inaccurate information hampered General Simonds' control during Operation Spring, contributing to the lack of success of this operation.¹¹¹ Mark Zuehlke says that the intermittent flow of information left Simonds confused, believing the initial objectives were secured when he ordered Phase II of Operation Spring.¹¹² Regrettably, the initial objective villages were largely not held by Canadian troops. Instead of coordinating support, the corps attempted to pass more soldiers through these enemy-controlled areas onto subsequent objectives.

Not only were the initial objectives unsecured, but the Canadian battalions were disjointed and faced strong enemy resistance. By 0900 hours, a brigade commander recommended the attack be called off as it would be unsuccessful.¹¹³ Based on the inaccurate picture of the battle, General Simonds did not make this same assessment for another 11 hours at a high cost to the corps. He ended the operation before the day was

¹¹⁰ Operation Cobra, the 1st United States Army major offensive in the west, started the same day as Operation Spring; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 183.

¹¹¹ Terry Copp defends General Simonds' poor decisions during Operation Spring on the erroneous information 2nd Canadian Corps headquarters possessed during decision-making; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 182; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 192.

¹¹² The corps believed that the towns of May-Sur-Orne and Tilly-La-Campagne were occupied and holding the villages against German counter-attacks, however these attacks had not been successful; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 193; Zuehlke, *Breakout from Juno*, 209; Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 172.

¹¹³ Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 182.

over and before seizing the ground they set out to obtain that morning.¹¹⁴ Outside of the Dieppe raid, Operation Spring was the costliest day of operations for the Canadian Army during the Second World War.¹¹⁵

Some facts, such as the German positions being strong and having high-quality troops, would have remained unchanged regardless of the employment of the XII Manitoba Dragoons.¹¹⁶ However, although this operation was plagued with communication issues down to the company level, more information would have been available to General Simonds had the Regiment conducted flank protection tasks. In this role, the Dragoons would have observed the outside villages and corrected the status of friendly force actions in those locations. Further, the Regiment would have addressed the inconsistent information passage to the corps' headquarters by relaying radio messages between organizations through its strong communication capabilities.¹¹⁷ At a minimum, more accurate battlefield knowledge within the corps' headquarters would have led to better decisions, which would have improved the results.

¹¹⁴ Copp, *Fields of Fire*, 179.

¹¹⁵ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 194.

¹¹⁶ The actions of Canadian troops in this engagement are described as hitting a stone wall by the Canadian Army's official historian; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 194.

¹¹⁷ A radio relay is employed when two organization cannot communicate due to the transmission signal being obstructed, normally by a terrain feature or buildings, or when the distance between the two organizations is too great for the signal to travel. The relay unit adopts a position between the two organization where they have signal with both units and relays messages between the two entities.

Roberts Influence Begins

Despite some hard lessons as Canadian leaders lacked an appreciation for an armoured car regiment, one positive from this period was the emergence of the Dragoons' commanding officer as an agent for positive change for the Regiment. After being removed from the defensive line on 18 July 1944, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts went to corps headquarters each day seeking further orders. Outside of some minor changes in position due to alterations to corps boundaries, he received the same response each day—remain in your current location and await further developments.¹¹⁸ Roberts even suggested the Regiment would be more optimally employed providing traffic control, a suitable task for an armoured car regiment.¹¹⁹ Despite the corps not taking this suggestion, this is the first indication of Roberts attempting to broaden the view of II Canadian Corps leaders on the capabilities of the Dragoons.

Roberts' efforts at improving the employment of his Regiment did not end with his failure to change the reserve task. Without a breakthrough in the German lines and two major operations resulting in high casualties, the Regiment received a familiar operational task before the month's end. On 28 July 1944, the corps directed the Dragoons to send 250 personnel to act as infantry to help relieve the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, currently on the front line and needing to reorganize after Operation

¹¹⁸ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 20-26 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹¹⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 23 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

Spring. Despite this suboptimal task, Roberts was determined to avoid the issues identified during his previous experience as infantry.

The relief of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was tasked to Major-General Kitching's 4th Canadian Armoured Division, the last Canadian formation in the II Canadian Corps to arrive in Normandy.¹²⁰ During orders, General Kitching directed that the Dragoons would, acting as infantry, relieve the unit holding the apex of the Canadian defensive line. During questions, Roberts argued against this task for his Regiment due to its shortfalls when tasked as infantry. Although Roberts felt terrible for embarrassing General Kitching, the commander agreed and assigned the task to a different unit.¹²¹

The Dragoons ultimately was ordered to act as infantry two days later.¹²² On this occasion, Roberts' influence was successful in improving the employment of the Dragoons. The Regiment was assigned to replace forces in the village of Bras, a location behind forward positions in the Canadian line, reducing the risk of heavy fighting.¹²³ Further, Roberts addressed the shortfalls in firepower for the Regiment. The Dragoons

¹²⁰ The 4th Canadian Division's main command post landing in France on 27 July 1944, receiving this task the following day; 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary Entry, 27 July 1944, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, "General Staff War Diary," January 1943-July 1944, RG24, C3, vol. 13788, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13788).

¹²¹ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 63.

¹²² XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 31 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹²³ Roberts highlighted the lack of weapons and equipment, and the specialized nature of the Regiment's training in his argument against this task; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 63.

had attached six 6-pound anti-tank guns under its command, which the Regiment believed enabled them to counter a potential German armoured advance.¹²⁴ Through Roberts' influence, the II Canadian Corps better employed the Dragoons during this infantry task.

Despite being minor changes, these events highlight that corps leaders respected Roberts, and he was able to use his influence to improve the use of his Regiment. This was just the beginning. Over the next eight weeks, Roberts continued to apply his expertise, ultimately transforming the Dragoons into a critical unit for the II Canadian Corps. Unbeknownst to the Regiment, this was its last employment as infantry for the remainder of the war. Less than a week later, the Dragoons reunited with its armoured cars and started on the path of proving its worth.

July 1944 was a challenging yet formative period for the Dragoons. The battlefield around Caen lacked sufficient maneuver space for an armoured car regiment to execute its medium reconnaissance role.¹²⁵ However, although Canadian corps leaders lacked an understanding of the optimal use of this unit, the Regiment experienced the stressors and horrors of combat, preparing themselves for the increased challenges to come. In addition, Roberts began to exert his influence within the corps, improving the utilization of his Regiment. The application of Roberts' expertise will continue, facilitating the Dragoons' evolution from a unit held in reserve, only used under specific conditions, to become a critical component of II Canadian Corps operations.

¹²⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 31 July 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹²⁵ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 12.

CHAPTER 4

ATTACKS TO FALAISE

We are proud of the way our armoured cars carried out their difficult role of deep penetration. On two or three occasions they got deep into enemy country, and if they cut notches in their Staghouls for every [German soldier], vehicle replacement will become a problem.

—*The Green Centre Line*, 19 August 1944

Held in reserve for the majority of July 1944, the XII Manitoba Dragoons was eager for an opportunity to leave its mark on the II Canadian Corps' operations. Over the first three weeks of August 1944, through the initiative and expertise of its commanding officer, the Regiment got its opportunity. Initially, Canadian leaders continued to search for valuable employment for the Dragoons as the battlefield did not require medium reconnaissance. With the arrival of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division into France, which had its reconnaissance element repurposed into an armoured regiment, the Dragoons began to be incorporated into operations. No longer held in reserve, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts seized an opportunity to showcase the positive effects the Dragoons could provide outside of medium reconnaissance. By the time Allied forces closed the Falaise Gap, the Dragoons were preparing to lead the II Canadian Corps' advance to the Seine River. Despite historians largely ignoring the actions of this critical unit, the Dragoons had transformed into the eyes of the corps, seeking critical information required for commanders to act. The operational history of armoured reconnaissance within the Canadian Armed Forces had begun.

Planning for Operation Totalize

Although the First Canadian Army established a tactical headquarters in France on 17 June 1944, the bridgehead surrounding Normandy was not sufficient for the 21st Army Group to require another army-level headquarters until 23 July 1944.¹²⁶ Once operational, General Montgomery assigned the I British Corps to the First Canadian Army, and gave them the responsibility of the Allies' left flank from Caen to the English Channel.¹²⁷ In addition, with Operation Spring complete, at 1200 hours on 31 July 1944, Montgomery further assigned the II Canadian Corps to the Canadian Army.¹²⁸ The First Canadian Army now commanded all Canadian troops in the northwestern European theatre.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 2.

¹²⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 196.

¹²⁸ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

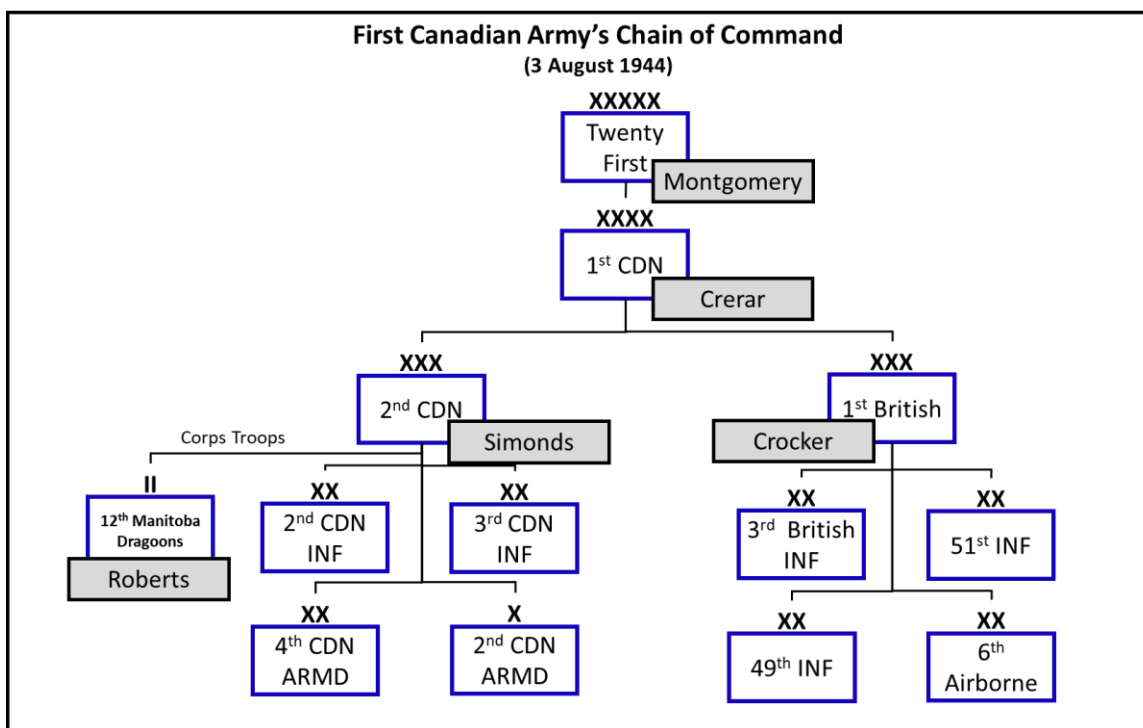


Figure 5. First Canadian Army's Chain of Command, 3 August 1944

Source: Created by author.

With its headquarters established and commanding two corps, the First Canadian Army was ready for offensive operations. Up to this point, the “holding attacks” by the II Canadian Corps and the continued threat of a major thrust towards Falaise by the Second British Army had forced the Germans to keep a concentration of armour east of the Orne River.¹³⁰ With Operation Cobra having broken through German defenses west of St. Lo,

¹³⁰ “Holding attack” was the term used in the Canadian Army’s Historical Section report. Although not found in doctrine, the term describes an attack whose primary purpose was not to defeat or destroy the enemy, but to hold them in their location to prevent them from reinforcing a different point on the battlefield; Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 4.

the First United States Army began swinging its lead elements eastwards.¹³¹ The Germans were forced to move a portion of their forces west to halt the American success. In anticipation of the enemy weakening their position in front of the Canadians, on 4 August 1944, General Montgomery directed the commander of the First Canadian Army, General Crerar, to execute an attack to the southeast, with Falaise as its ultimate objective.¹³² This operation became known as Operation Totalize and saw the XII Manitoba Dragoons in its intended role, as medium reconnaissance, though not to its fullest potential.

On 4 August 1944, the Dragoons continued its infantry role after occupying Bras three days previously.¹³³ That night, the Regiment's commanding officer attended a conference held by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division Commander, which discussed Operation Totalize.¹³⁴ While the division waited for the finalized corps plan before solidifying its orders, the Regiment received instructions to prepare to pursue the withdrawing enemy following the penetration of their defensive line. Although attached

¹³¹ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 3.

¹³² Ibid., 5.

¹³³ Situation Report thirteen for period 041200 to 042400 August 1944, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, "General Staff War Diary," August-December 1944, RG24, C3, vol. 13789, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789); Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 17.

¹³⁴ 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary Entry, 4 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

to an armoured division and not the corps, the Regiment was excited to end its infantry role and play its “normal part—as armoured cars.”¹³⁵

Planning for Operation Totalize was primarily left to the II Canadian Corps.¹³⁶ General Simonds believed he faced the 1st SS Panzer Corps occupying two main defensive lines. The first series of positions stretched from May-sur-Orne to Tilly-la-Campagne, and the second line five kilometers south from Bretteville-sur-Laize to St. Sylvain.¹³⁷ Although the written operation order had three phases, ultimately, Simonds executed a two-part plan. Phase 1 was the breakthrough of the initial enemy line by the 2nd Canadian Infantry and 51st (Highland) British Infantry Divisions.¹³⁸ Phase 2 was the breakthrough of the second enemy defensive line by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division on the right (to points 180, 195, and 206) and the 1st Polish Armoured Division on the left (to points 170 and 159).¹³⁹

¹³⁵ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 5 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14249.

¹³⁶ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 240; On 1 August 1944, I British Corps provided two of its divisions to Second British Army. As a result of their reduced strength, I British Corps had a subsidiary role in Operation Totalize.

¹³⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 208; Major John Rickard, *Worthington Force Staff Ride Handbook 1* (Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Army Publishing Office, 2020), https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/army/lineofsight/files/articlefiles/en/B-GL-315-001_CACSC%20Staff_Ride%20Handbook_EN.pdf.

¹³⁸ II Canadian Corps Operation Instruction Number Four—Operation Totalize, 5 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712.

¹³⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 214; The initial plan had Phase 2 being completed solely by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. However, on 6 August 1944, after the Germans withdrew the 1st and 9th SS Panzer Divisions, General Simonds modified his orders.

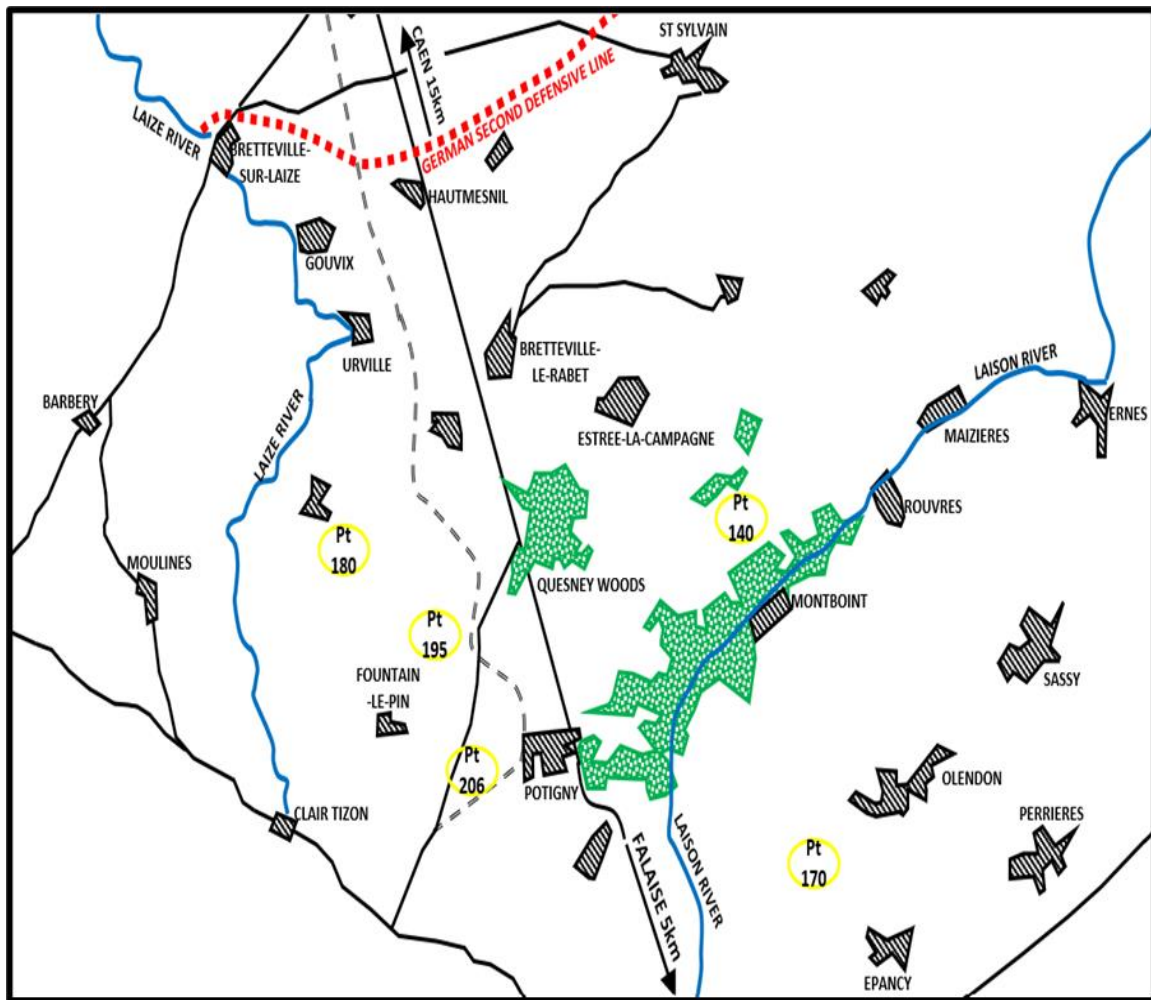


Figure 6. Area of the XII Manitoba Dragoons' Operations in August 1944

Source: Created by author.

As the corps did not see value in an armoured car regiment before breaking through the enemy defensive position, its plan did not incorporate the Dragoons. Instead, as indicated earlier, the corps attached the Regiment to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. This command relationship reduced the ability of the corps' reconnaissance element to provide timely information in support of its commander. However, as the corps' narrow vision of the Dragoons saw the unit following the lead brigades until the

situation required medium reconnaissance, this arrangement was logical. That said, by the time this operation concluded, the Dragoons would highlight to the corps that this was not the optimal location for its reconnaissance element.

At 1800 hours on 7 August 1944, General Kitching issued his orders to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. The overall plan was to concentrate in an assembly area for Phase 1, and during Phase 2 the division would advance with two brigades forward, the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade on the right and the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade on the left.¹⁴⁰ Although the Dragoons were issued tasks in the division's written instructions for Operation Totalize, for the preponderance of the operation, the Regiment would follow the formation and await an opportunity to conduct medium reconnaissance.¹⁴¹ A subtle yet significant difference between this operation and the Dragoons' reserve tasks in July 1944 was that the unit followed immediately behind the lead brigade. While still not taking full advantage of the Regiment's capabilities, being forward provided flexibility to the division commander to use the Dragoons in other tasks immediately, should an opportunity arise. This key difference set the conditions for the Regiment to show the value of an armoured car regiment beyond medium reconnaissance and increase its level of employment throughout this operation.

¹⁴⁰ Outline of Instructions Issued by GOC 4th Canadian Armoured Division 071300 August 1944–Op Totalizer [sic], 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; George Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields: The Memoirs of Major General George Kitching* (Langley, British Columbia, Canada: Battleline Books, 1986), 210, 211.

¹⁴¹ 4th Cdn Armd Div Instructions for Op Totalizer[sic], 7 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789, 3; The other tasks issued to the Dragoons were to occur at the end of Phase 2. First, it would provide convoy escort for administrative vehicles moving from the assembly area to their final positions. Second, the Regiment would be prepared to exploit south and east towards Falaise and Argentan.

Operation Totalize began on 7 August 1944 at 2300 hours with a bombing campaign, followed by the ground force from the II Canadian Corps crossing its line of departure 30 minutes later.¹⁴² Twenty-four hours earlier, the XII Manitoba Dragoons was relieved from its infantry task and reunited with its armoured cars in preparation for the advance.¹⁴³ After the bombing campaign commenced, the Regiment crossed its start line and co-located with its assigned brigades.¹⁴⁴ Phase 1 of Operation Totalize was largely successful, and H-hour for Phase 2 was set for 1355 hours.¹⁴⁵ However, despite the II Canadian Corps' armoured divisions crossing the start line on time, Phase 2 was stalled by casualties caused by both the Germans and errant friendly bombing.¹⁴⁶ By nightfall, progress was not as planned, and operations were generally suspended despite orders by the corps commander to press straight through the night.¹⁴⁷ As a result, the Regiment completed no significant actions throughout this day.

¹⁴² Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 218.

¹⁴³ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 18; Personnel from the Regiment, who were not required for the infantry task and had stayed with the vehicles, brought the armoured cars to Giberville.

¹⁴⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 8 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14249; One squadron was assigned to each of the two lead brigades.

¹⁴⁵ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 222.

¹⁴⁶ Errant heavy bombing by the U.S. Air Force resulted in over 64 killed and 250 wounded, including General Rod Keller, Commander 3rd Canadian Infantry Division; Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 212; The Poles were struck by heavy fire, described as a "curtain of fire" by the 10 (Polish) Armoured Cavalry Brigade, as they crossed their start line, losing at least 26 Sherman tanks in a matter of minutes; Rickard, *Worthington Force Staff Ride*, 16.

¹⁴⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 225; Canadian armoured units had become accustomed to harboring at night and were not comfortable conducting night operations.

Canadian Armoured Reconnaissance Operational History Begins

By 2200 hours, the XII Manitoba Dragoons consolidated behind the lead brigades in preparation for the recommencement of operations early the following morning. At this moment, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts, using his initiative and tactical understanding gained through study and training, altered the course of history for armoured reconnaissance within the First Canadian Army. Roberts issued new tasks to his squadron commanders that evening.¹⁴⁸ Although no written record of these tasks exists, the Regiment began executing a flank protection role to support the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's advance the following morning. It appears that Roberts, operating within the flexibility afforded to him by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, seized an opportunity to provide increased value by modifying his task from following lead brigades to flank protection. This slight modification set the conditions to showcase, over the next several weeks, how an armoured car regiment could positively influence a formation commander's decision-making outside of its medium reconnaissance role.

Two squadrons set out to execute their flank protection tasks in the early morning hours of 9 August 1944. B Squadron on the eastern flank did not contact enemy elements. Nevertheless, it established communications with the 1st Polish Armoured Division, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's flanking formation. The squadron maintained contact with the Poles throughout the day, passing information to its division's headquarters,

¹⁴⁸ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 8 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14249.

which included a heavy enemy presence in the village of Estreé-la-Campagne.¹⁴⁹ The 4th Canadian Armoured Division's situation report included this information, as the corps commander was concerned the enemy in this area might disrupt his armour while seizing Point 195, a final objective for Operation Totalize.¹⁵⁰ With the Regiment now in a flank protection role, it began providing relevant information that the division or corps would not have received from another source.

On the western flank, D Squadron also increased the level of battlefield understanding within the II Canadian Corps. The squadron reported several villages free of enemy, then crossed the Laize River to continue to develop the enemy picture. After several minor skirmishes with German forces, the squadron reported the enemy in considerable numbers in Gouvix and Urville. Even though these villages did not require immediate action by the II Canadian Corps, the formation staff used this information in their analysis and determined to launch an operation into this area following Totalize. More immediately, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division staff noticed their situational understanding improved through the Regiment in its flank protection role, describing the Regiment's patrolling as both extensive and successful.¹⁵¹ Although these actions occurred over the course of just one day, the realization that the Dragoons could impact

¹⁴⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 9 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 18.

¹⁵⁰ 4th Canadian Armoured Division War Diary Entry, 9 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Twenty Three Period 09 1200 to 09 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

¹⁵¹ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report 09 1200 to 09 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

operations in roles other than medium reconnaissance was harnessed by the 4th Canadian Armoured Division immediately.

Despite the successful flank protection provided by the Dragoons on 9 August 1944, this was not the most significant task to II Canadian Corps operations on this day. With Phase 2 of Operation Totalize not achieving the envisioned success during its first several hours, General Simonds pressured his division commanders to push towards their final objectives through the night. The 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade Commander received this direction and, just before midnight, issued an updated order to seize two of the division's final objectives: Points 180 and 195. Capturing Point 195 by first light was assigned to a battlegroup named Worthington Force.¹⁵² Unfortunately, while advancing to Point 195 during the early morning on 9 August 1944, Worthington Force became disoriented and adopted a position six kilometers to the east of its objective, near Point 140 within the 1st Polish Division's boundaries. Making the situation worse, Worthington did not realize he was in the wrong location and repeatedly reported Point 195 seized.¹⁵³

When the Germans counter-attacked Worthington's Force at approximately 0830 hours, coordinating artillery support and reinforcements became disastrous. Having lost communication with Worthington's Force and receiving reports it was in severe trouble,

¹⁵² This force, named after the commander officer for the British Columbia Regiment (BCR), Colonel Don Worthington, which the battlegroup was based upon, comprised of three tank squadrons from the BCR and three infantry companies from the Algonquin Regiment; Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 214.

¹⁵³ Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 214; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 225-227.

the division commander became concerned. He dispatched a patrol from the Dragoons to verify the situation at Point 195,¹⁵⁴ who reported no sign of enemy or Worthington's Force on this objective.¹⁵⁵ Unfortunately, Worthington's Force was destroyed in its incorrect location.¹⁵⁶ However, with the status of Point 195 finally clarified by the Dragoons, the division commander directed a new plan, and the area was subsequently seized by elements of the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade later that night.¹⁵⁷ Although the division had attempted to confirm the location of Worthington's Force and the status of Point 195 through aerial surveillance,¹⁵⁸ radio transmissions, and a less responsive ground force,¹⁵⁹ it was the XII Manitoba Dragoons that improved the division's situational awareness.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 9 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 18.

¹⁵⁵ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 97, 9 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712.

¹⁵⁶ The British Columbia Regiment lost 47 tanks, nearly their entire strength, along with 112 personnel including Lieutenant-Colonel Worthington.

¹⁵⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 229.

¹⁵⁸ Brigadier Lane, Royal Canadian Artillery, flew in a small spotting aircraft looking for Worthington's force during the morning of 9 August 1944 without success; Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 214.

¹⁵⁹ The 21st Canadian Armoured Regiment (The Governor General's Foot Guards) were ordered to move as quickly as possible to Point 195 at 1030 hours to assist Worthington's Force. Slow to organize, it did not start their move until 1500 hours and did not make it to the objective that night due to enemy fire en route; John English, *Failure in High Command* (Ottawa: Golden Dog Press, 2000), 280.

¹⁶⁰ Marteinson and McNorgan, *The RCAC Illustrated History*, 269.

Although not formally described in the war diaries or memoirs of Canadian leaders, this event demonstrated the utility of a ground force that could clarify uncertain situations to improve a commander's decision-making. This special reconnaissance task, along with the information gathered during flank protection throughout the day, demonstrated to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division that an armoured car regiment was far more useful than merely a medium reconnaissance tool. Although historians generally glance over the details, the actions by the XII Manitoba Dragoons, without question, positively influenced Canadian operations on this day.

Special Reconnaissance Tasks

Although the II Canadian Corps' actions on 10 August 1944 were not overly successful, this day saw the Dragoons continuing to build upon the previous day's success. As the division had not made substantial gains, the Regiment resumed its flank protection task on the ground it had reconnoitered the day prior. One squadron contacted several friendly troops who had been cut off by German counterattacks, some for over two days. With its knowledge of the terrain, the Regiment guided these soldiers out of view of the enemy to rejoin their units.¹⁶¹ In addition, despite engagements with the enemy by multiple units within the division, the information on enemy activity contained within the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's situation report for 10 August 1944 had information gathered solely by the Dragoons.¹⁶² Patrolling the formation's flank not only

¹⁶¹ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 19.

¹⁶² 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Twenty Five Period 10 1200 to 10 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

protected the division, but provided valuable information to the corps' staff for planning subsequent operations.

After seeing firsthand the utility of special reconnaissance tasks during the confusion surrounding the Worthington Force mission, General Kitching tasked the Regiment in a similar role on 10 August 1944. After reports of enemy positions on the west flank of the division from the Dragoons on 9 August 1944,¹⁶³ through his actions, it appears the division commander was concerned about his flank as his formation advanced south. As a result, Kitching directed the Regiment to cross the Laize River and collect information on the enemy and ground from Mesnil-Touffrye to Clair-Tizen. This information was of such importance that the troop leaders were brought directly to General Kitching to give a firsthand report of their findings.¹⁶⁴ The Regiment confirmed the enemy locations on the division's western flank and provided a greater understanding of how the German front line extended beyond the Laize River across the division's front. This intelligence caused the division to change its scheme of maneuver, holding the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade from pushing further south, which would have exposed its flank to this threat.¹⁶⁵ Further, the troop leaders also observed evidence that an enemy division was withdrawing from this location. This observation will prove critical in due course.

¹⁶³ This report was mentioned previously in this chapter when the Regiment identified enemy in the villages of Gouvix and Urville.

¹⁶⁴ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 10 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁶⁵ Summary of Instructions Issued from 4th Canadian Armoured Division on 10 2300 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

To obtain valuable information from these special patrols was not easy. While identifying the enemy in the village of Moulines, enemy infantry attacked the Dragoons' patrols. This fierce enemy engagement caused the Dragoons to retrograde from the village, during which they killed approximately thirty soldiers.¹⁶⁶ The fighting was so intense that, in one instance, German soldiers climbed onto the patrol's armoured cars. The troop leader's wireless message to his sergeant most aptly described the situation: "For God's sake, get out of this; this is no place for man or beast."¹⁶⁷ Maneuvering ahead of the formation's front lines, with little information on the enemy's disposition and no reinforcements, highlights the skill and composure under pressure demanded from the soldiers of the XII Manitoba Dragoons. The Regiment's reward for providing this critical information was receiving even more reconnaissance tasks from the division, ordered to reconnoiter towards Falaise and on both flanks the following day.¹⁶⁸ By the third day of Operation Totalize, the Dragoons had established it not only passively collected information, but was ready and capable to fight for it as well.

Although the Dragoons were attached to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division during August 1944, its operations had influence beyond the division-level. On 10 August 1944, the II Canadian Corps was unsuccessful in attaining its objectives for Operation Totalize. Facing strong enemy resistance, General Simonds determined that

¹⁶⁶ The troop leader, Lt Goodday, and the troop sergeant, Sgt Keele, received the Military Cross and the Military Medal, respectively, for their actions.

¹⁶⁷ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 19.

¹⁶⁸ Summary of Instructions from 4th Canadian Armoured Division on 10 2300 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

although his corps had advanced nine miles, he needed to mount another large-scale deliberate attack to reach Falaise. On 11 August 1944, Simonds canceled all attacks and issued new orders under the name Operation Tractable.¹⁶⁹ Later that afternoon, the above-mentioned report from the Dragoons' special reconnaissance patrol reached Simonds. Contained within the report were indications that the Germans were withdrawing forces on the corps' west flank.¹⁷⁰ Based upon this new information, Simonds directed that the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division undertake a recce-in-force southward towards Clair Tizon, the exact area of the Dragoons' special reconnaissance task the previous day.¹⁷¹

This maneuver was a shaping operation for Operation Tractable and the corps' main effort on 12 August 1944. This action aimed to weaken the enemy by threatening its flank before launching the corps' main attack.¹⁷² This shaping operation was largely successful and ultimately supported the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division to use the road from Clair Tizon to advance towards and eventually capture Falaise.¹⁷³ Without the actions by the Dragoons over the previous three days—first identifying enemy west of the Laize River, then the special reconnaissance patrol into this area where they identified a withdrawing enemy—this successful operation would not likely have occurred. These actions were so profound that the commanding officer penned a note to all regimental

¹⁶⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 231.

¹⁷⁰ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 20; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 231.

¹⁷¹ Zuehlke, *Breakout From Juno*, 338.

¹⁷² Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 236.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 237; English, *Failure in High Command*, 299.

troops expressing his congratulations on their magnificent performance over the previous days. He also stated the Regiment had “justified [their] existence as a unit.”¹⁷⁴ His assessment could not have been more accurate. In addition, it indicates that II Canadian Corps leaders were still questioning the utility of an armoured car regiment up to this point in the war. Now, the Regiment no longer needed to fight for employment and continued to have its role expanded.

With the Regiment seen in a different light by Canadian commanders within the corps, the flexibility afforded to the Dragoons expanded. In the short period between Operations Totalize and Tractable, while the 4th Canadian Armoured Division was preparing for its upcoming mission, the Dragoons continuously patrolled. Situation reports to the II Canadian Corps headquarters for these days stated that the only activities conducted by the division were that of the Dragoons.¹⁷⁵ During these patrols, the Regiment engaged and destroyed its first German tanks.¹⁷⁶ Although lightly armoured, the Staghound armoured car possessed sufficient firepower to react to unexpected contact with the enemy. This direct fire threat facilitated Regimental maneuver, as a single enemy tank would not halt the Dragoons’ ability to advance. For the remainder of the war, the Regiment sought innovative ways of attaching anti-tank rocket projectiles to its Staghounds and obtaining vehicles with larger caliber main guns. Its view was this would

¹⁷⁴ James Roberts, “Letter To Be Read To All Troops,” 12 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁷⁵ II Canadian Corps Operations Log, 11-14 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712; 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Twenty Nine Period 12 1200 to 12 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

¹⁷⁶ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 20.

prevent “strategic withdrawal”¹⁷⁷ whenever a Panther or Tiger tank would appear.¹⁷⁸

Whether or not reconnaissance vehicles should be more or less lethal is debated in many other works and, as such, will not be examined in this paper. However, it is clear what side of the argument the XII Manitoba Dragoons supported.

While the Dragoons patrolled in the lead-up to Operation Tractable, planning for the operation was executed throughout the First Canadian Army. The purpose of the operation was to prevent the escape of German troops trapped between the First Canadian Army to the north and those of the United States forces pushing northward from Argentan towards Falaise.¹⁷⁹ The circumstances surrounding this operation had many similarities to Operation Totalize. As a result, the plan was generally the same with two divisions forward: the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division on the right and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division on the left.¹⁸⁰ However, despite similar operational variables, it is clear that Canadian leaders noticed the positive effects of the XII Manitoba Dragoons outside of its medium reconnaissance role. For the first time, the Regiment was included in the II Canadian Corps’ plan. The Dragoons was formally tasked as the corps’ left flank

¹⁷⁷ “Strategic Withdrawal” was the term the Regiment used when describing their assessment on the need for increased firepower. Although there was nothing strategic about their actions, this term was describing the need for the Regiment to halt its advance and await for combat forces when enemy armoured vehicles blocked their advance.

¹⁷⁸ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 12 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁷⁹ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 146, 17; General Montgomery believed that if the 15th United States Corps drove north to Argentan, Canadian and United States forces could encircle the German 7th Army, destroying them in the vicinity of Falaise; Zuehlke, *Breakout From Juno*, 337.

¹⁸⁰ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 239.

protection and directed to seize several bridges to support the 4th Canadian Armoured Divisions advance.¹⁸¹ The expanded utilization of the Regiment again indicates the continued evolution of the Dragoons in the eyes of Canadian leaders.

Operation Tractable

On 14 August 1944 at 1142 hours, radio silence was broken, and the II Canadian Corps began moving towards its start line. With a smoke screen starting at 1155 hours, Operation Tractable officially began.¹⁸² Unfortunately for the XII Manitoba Dragoons, during the first few hours of the operation, the Regiment was bombed by friendly aircraft twice, suffering several casualties. However, despite this setback, the Regiment continued with its tasks to provide flank protection.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Although attached to 4th Canadian Armoured Division, the XII Manitoba Dragoons appear on the II Canadian Corps Operation Overlay in a corps flank protection role; Outline of Instructions Issued by GOC 4th Canadian Armoured Division 131230 August 1944—Op Tractable, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 14 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁸² Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 240.

¹⁸³ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 14 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

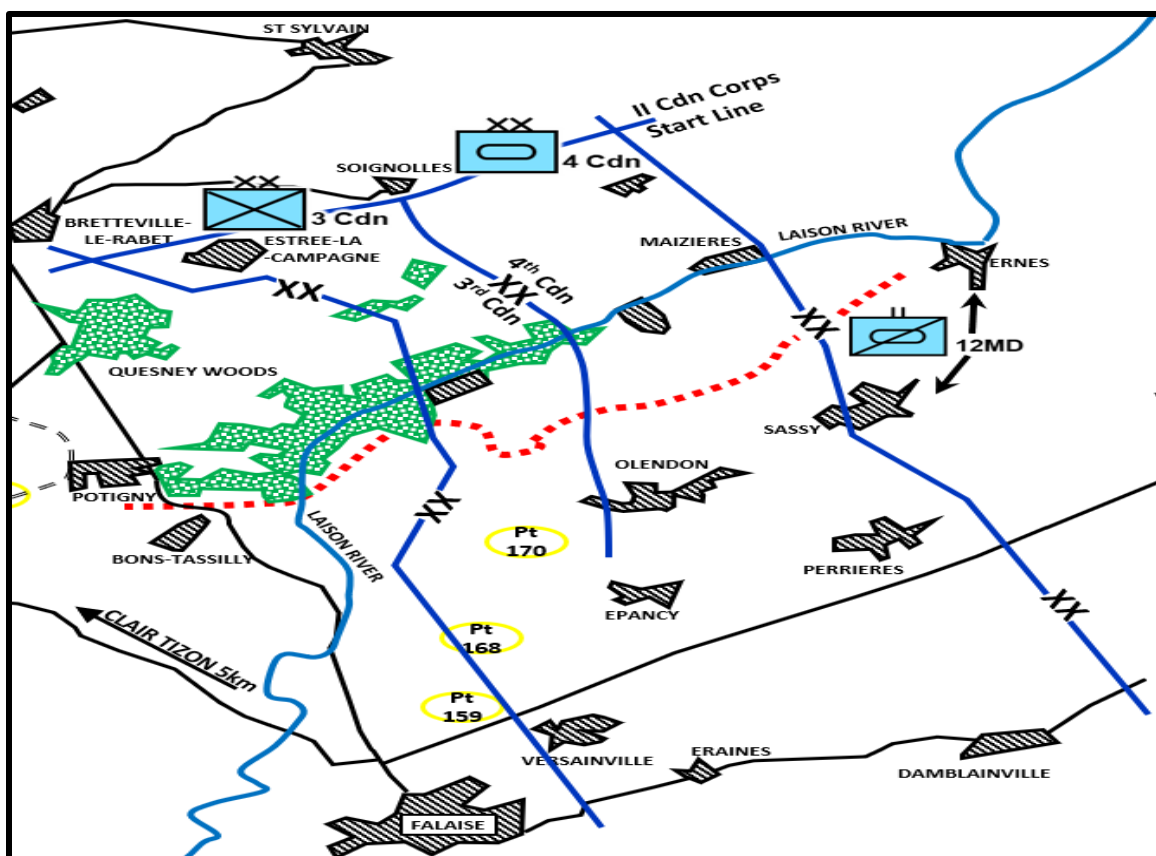


Figure 7. Plan for Operation Tractable

Source: Created by author.

Phase I of Operation Tractable involved crossing the Laison River, a formidable anti-tank obstacle being six-feet wide and several feet deep.¹⁸⁴ B Squadron was ordered to capture two crossings along this river. However, it determined that the bridges were impassable and moved further east to identify a suitable location.¹⁸⁵ With many bridges destroyed by withdrawing Germans, the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade was also left

¹⁸⁴ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 241; Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, 219.

¹⁸⁵ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 22.

searching for suitable crossings. As can be seen in Figure 6, with the Dragoons on the east flank of the II Canadian Corps, it was surprised to see elements of the armoured brigade passing by its front heading further east. Highlighting another benefit of a flank protection unit, the Regiment guided these elements back into the II Canadian Corps' boundaries to carry out their assigned missions.¹⁸⁶

By 2300 hours 14 August 1944, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division reported that the assault across the Laison River was successful despite slow progress south of the river.¹⁸⁷ The Regiment's actions were slow due to the number of prisoners it took, capturing 139 during the first day of the operation.¹⁸⁸ Yet, by the end of this day, the Regiment had observation on the village of Sassy, part of the corps' initial objectives. The North Shore Regiment, directed to occupy Sassy, used the Regiment's information during preparation for its attack that night.¹⁸⁹ It is clear that the 4th Canadian Division was satisfied with the activities of the Regiment, as it described the Dragoons' actions as "actively patrolled" when reporting its actions to II Canadian Corps. The word "actively" may not appear of consequence on the surface. However, drafters did not often use

¹⁸⁶ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 14 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁸⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 241.

¹⁸⁸ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 14 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Thirty Three Period 14 1200 to 14 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

¹⁸⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 241; Situation Report Thirty Three, 14 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

adjectives to describe unit activities in these precise reports. This additional descriptor of the Dragoons' task perhaps signifies greater than average performance.

The war diarist's oversimplification of the Regiment's actions with the word "actively" brings to light the challenges of studying reconnaissance operations. While there are many instances where there are clear linkages between reports from a reconnaissance unit and action taken by friendly forces, often a reconnaissance unit's activities are overall crucial to the success of the operation, yet hard to quantify. That said, the hard to measure impacts of the Regiment's actions on 14 August 1944 are well articulated by Charles Henry in the Regiment's official history:

The Regiment operated on the frontage of three divisions, gave information that allowed the infantry to move at normal marching speed without need for caution and without fear of attack for at least ten miles and over a wide front. Much valuable time is thus saved. Infantry is allowed to get into position well before last light, plan areas and defences, and cook meals. Because the armoured car troops were able to contribute to the speeding up of the advance, they themselves were able to seek protection behind our own lines for the night and to be prepared to go out again on the morrow fresh and able to assist again.¹⁹⁰

Henry described qualitatively that the Dragoons' actions resulted in the corps advancing more rapidly, saving time, allowing for better defenses at night, and more rest for Canadian soldiers. The fact that the Regiment continued to be employed suggests these were real benefits seen by II Canadian Corps leaders. The challenge contributing to the lack of historical study into Canadian reconnaissance is the difficulty quantifying this improvement. How much faster was the corps, or how many lives were saved due to better protected and more rested soldiers is impossible to measure. But, as difficult to

¹⁹⁰ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 22.

measure as these benefits are, it does not diminish their importance or the critical role the XII Manitoba Dragoons had on II Canadian Corps operations.

Fighting Around Falaise

Over the next few days, General Montgomery adjusted his plans in an attempt to have the First Canadian Army link up with General Patton's forces, trapping the 7th German Army in the Falaise Gap.¹⁹¹ With German troops left with no choice but to surrender or break out of the gap, those who chose to fight made the Allied advance a slow and fiercely contested task. Nevertheless, by the evening of 21 August 1944, the First Canadian Army stated "nothing to report" in its area of operations, indicating that the action around Falaise had ended.¹⁹² Throughout this period, the XII Manitoba Dragoons remained in its flank protection role.

The fact that the XII Manitoba Dragoons were conducting flank protection during the closing of the Falaise Gap does not by itself imply it contributed positively to its formation's operations. That said, a closer examination of the war diaries indicates the Regiment was critical to operations over this period. First, over and above repeated reports on observed enemy, there are numerous examples where the Dragoons identified key pieces of information. For instance, on 21 August 1944 the unit identified over 600 disorganized enemy soldiers and liaised with the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade to

¹⁹¹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 241.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 264.

“round them up.”¹⁹³ Earlier that same day, the Regiment reported that the corps situation was unclear due to the enemy infiltrating its lines. To improve situational understanding, the Regiment provided information directly to the corps’ headquarters on the activities of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, who were either occupied with fighting their division or experiencing communication difficulties. This information was significant because reports of routine nature were generally only given to the corps’ operations staff. As the corps’ operation log noted that this communication was passed directly to the commander’s aides-de-camp and the chief of staff, this is indicative that these individuals, and likely the commander, required these details without delay.¹⁹⁴

A second indication of the Regiment’s positive influence occurred on 20 August 1944. On that day, an aggressive German counter-attack cut-off the 1st Polish Armoured Division from the remainder of the Allied force. The unit exhausted its supplies of ammunition, fuel, and food while desperately fighting against Germans attacking from all sides.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, soldiers from the XII Manitoba Dragoons found a route to the Polish Division and escorted a convoy of supplies to support its operations.¹⁹⁶ Without these needed supplies, the Polish Division would have been less effective in countering

¹⁹³ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 30, 21 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712.

¹⁹⁴ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 23, 21 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712.

¹⁹⁵ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 262; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 20 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

¹⁹⁶ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 25; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 74.

the penetrating enemy, increasing the number of Germans who escaped the encirclement around Falaise.

Finally, the flexibility provided to the Regiment enabled them to seize opportunities to execute decisive operations. For example, on 20 August 1944, two squadrons from the Regiment reported a location where the enemy was breaking out of their encirclement. The commanding officer ordered the two remaining squadrons to find fire positions onto the escaping enemy. Although not designed for direct engagement with enemy forces, the Regiment proved its armoured cars were again a formidable vehicle. The division reported that the Dragoons destroyed 24 vehicles, including two tanks. This figure was likely a best estimation. Still, nearly all troops expended their full complement of ammunition against numerous half-tracks, tanks, self-propelled guns, trucks, and infantry. The Regiment's offensive abilities undoubtedly reduced the German's effectiveness on this day.¹⁹⁷

No one metric will, without question, demonstrate that an armoured car regiment was critical to operations. However, when one considers all the positive effects the XII Manitoba Dragoons contributed during the first three weeks of August 1944, undoubtedly, the Regiment was critical to the corps' actions. Fortunately for the II Canadian Corps, this was just the beginning. The German Army was now withdrawing east towards the Seine, and the Allies were preparing their pursuit. The conditions were set for the Regiment to participate in what British reconnaissance units called "the great

¹⁹⁷ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 25; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 73.

swan”—the advance to Germany, where reconnaissance regiments would be in their element—conducting medium reconnaissance.¹⁹⁸

Looking back, there had been a significant progression for the Regiment in just three weeks. The end of July 1944 saw the XII Manitoba Dragoons without its armoured cars and occupying a defensive position as dismounted infantry. Canadian leaders had initially understood the importance of this unit, but only within the parameters of pursuing a retreating enemy in a medium reconnaissance role. Just three weeks later, and thanks to the initiative of its commanding officer, the Dragoons fulfilled tasks during offensive and hasty defensive operations. The Dragoons demonstrated its effectiveness in a flank protection role, providing awareness on friendly force locations and reporting enemy movements outside of its higher formation’s immediate area of operations. While the formation rested, the Regiment continuously patrolled, providing relevant information to support decision-making. Further, their ability to execute special tasks for a commander immediately satisfied information requests, making the Regiment a versatile and valuable asset throughout different types of operations. This formative period for the XII Manitoba Dragoons, and Canadian armoured reconnaissance in general, saw the Regiment transform into the eyes of the corps and become a crucial component of the II Canadian Corps’ operations. With this view clear in General Simonds’ mind, the task of leading the corps’ thrust through the Seine and into Belgium would now be trusted to the XII Manitoba Dragoons.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Doherty, *The British Reconnaissance Corps in World War II* (New York, NY: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 28.

CHAPTER 5

TO THE LEOPOLD CANAL

The time has come when, temporarily at least, we must part. I am called to other duties, but I leave, happy in the knowledge that the Regiment has found itself, and that its place in the history of this war is assured by its own efforts.

—LTC J. A. Roberts, CO XII Manitoba Dragoons
quoted in *The Staghound*, 10 November 1944

Following the Regiment's success during the first three weeks of August 1944, II Canadian Corps leaders began to understand armoured reconnaissance better. Yet, corps leadership still struggled to optimally employ the XII Manitoba Dragoons in the pursuit across France. With the fighting surrounding Falaise over, the corps directed the Dragoons to lead the advance east. Through this period, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts maximized the Dragoons' capabilities, with the Regiment being the lead Canadian unit to reach the Seine and Somme Rivers, and into Belgium. Along the way, the Dragoons increased the speed of the corps' advance, liberated several cities, including the seizure of a much-needed seaport, and held a 20-kilometer line along the Leopold Canal. By the time the German Army had halted the Canadian advance, Generals Crerar and Simonds praised the Regiment for its actions, and the corps' chief of staff compared its achievements to those accomplished by brigades and divisions.¹⁹⁹ These events concluded a two-month transformation that saw the Dragoons change from a single-

¹⁹⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 27 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Letter to Commanding Officer XII Manitoba Dragoons from Chief of Staff II Canadian Corps, 19 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

purpose unit held in reserve, to a force that led the corps' operations with outputs comparable to units three times its size.²⁰⁰

The Race to the Seine River

Although the fighting around the Falaise Gap continued until 21 August 1944, detailed planning for the First Canadian Army's advance towards the Seine began several days earlier. General Crerar directed his two corps commanders to prepare for this mission, with the II Canadian Corps' objective specified as the village of Elbeuf, located just south of Rouen.²⁰¹ While waiting for the order to attack, the corps was to carry out active reconnaissance along its axis of advance.²⁰² General Simonds received a warning for this task on 15 August 1944 and directed the Dragoons to return under his command, from the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, to conduct this reconnaissance and prepare for the Regiment to lead the advance east.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ The chief of staff of the II Canadian Corps compared the Dragoons output to that of a brigade or a division. With a typical brigade consisting of three battalions, the Regiment's output can be said, at times, to be equal to that of a unit three times its size.

²⁰¹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 279.

²⁰² Ibid; Historical Section, Canadian Military Headquarters (CAHQ), Report No. 183, *Canadian Participation in the Operations in North West Europe, 1944. Part IV: First Canadian Army in the Pursuit (23 Aug-30 Sep)* (Ottawa: Government of Canada Publications, September 1947), 3, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/reports/cmhq-reports/cmhq168.pdf>.

²⁰³ II Canadian Corps Operations Log serial 28, 16 August 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13712; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 249.

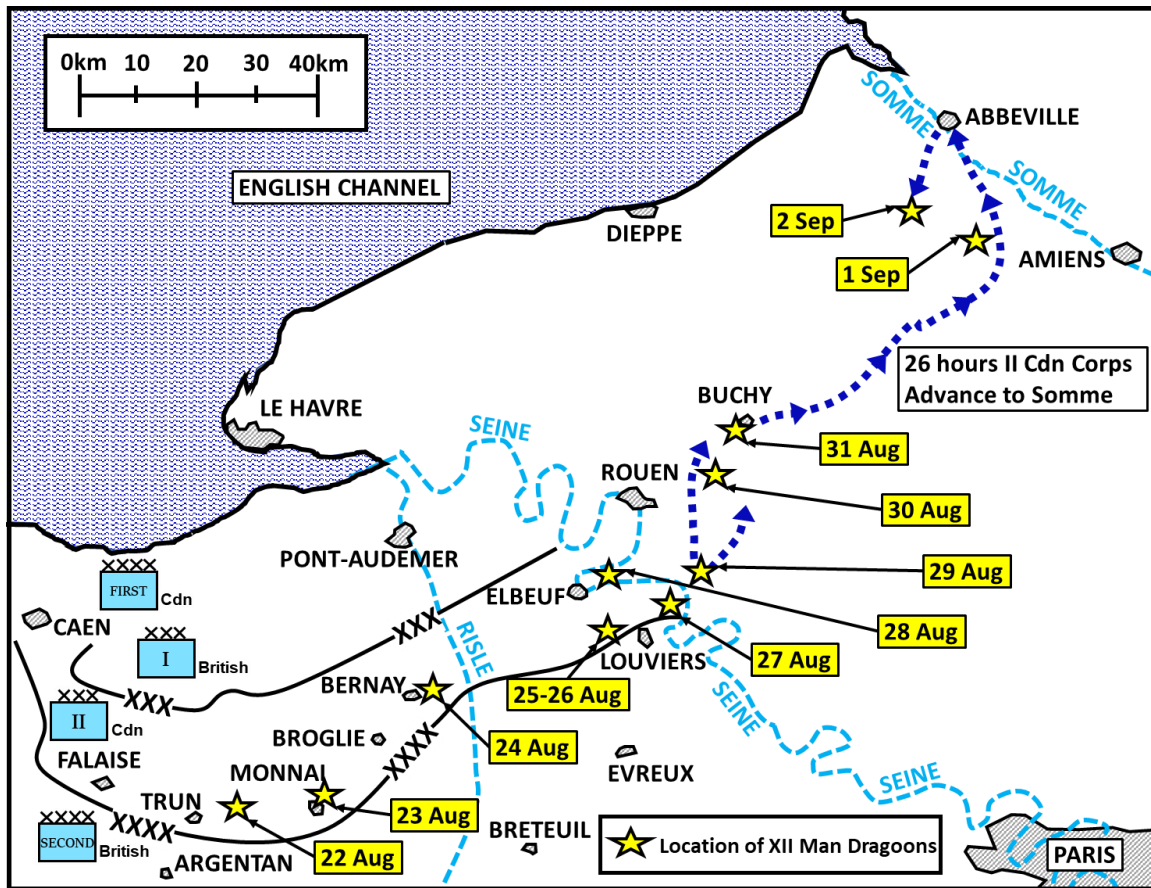


Figure 8. XII Manitoba Dragoons Advance to the Somme River

Source: Created by author.

Although II Canadian Corps leaders did not fully understand how an armoured car regiment should be employed, their level of knowledge was improving. For example, in the days preceding the advance towards the Seine, the corps assigned the Dragoons tasks supporting both current and future operations. With the corps set to move on 22 August 1944, the previous six days saw the Dragoons tasked to collect information on several

bridges and multiple villages in support of planning for this operation.²⁰⁴ While still providing flank protection for the fighting around Falaise, the Regiment contacted the 50th British Infantry Division, the flanking unit to the south of the First Canadian Army.²⁰⁵ Further, the Dragoons identified two crossing sites required to start the corps' advance and confirmed the enemy had departed several towns.²⁰⁶ The corps could therefore plan its advance towards the Seine with current knowledge of the enemy, key terrain features, and information on its flanking friendly units. This allowed the corps to resume its push east as soon as the fighting surrounding Falaise was finished. The accelerated tempo resulted in the II Canadian Corps more quickly pursuing the withdrawing enemy.

On 21 August 1944, Simonds instructed the II Canadian Corps to begin its move to the Seine the following morning. He directed his corps to advance with three divisions forward, led by the XII Manitoba Dragoons.²⁰⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts described the directions he received from Simonds for this task in his memoir. The Regiment was to proceed at the fastest speed possible to Elbeuf, bypassing German rear-guard positions

²⁰⁴ Summary GOC 4th Canadian Armoured Division Orders Group 212100 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 26.

²⁰⁵ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Fifty Period 22 1200 to 22 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

²⁰⁶ Summary of Instructions Issued by GOC 4th Canadian Armoured Division 221800 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁰⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 280.

and leaving prisoners to be captured by following friendly forces.²⁰⁸ Despite Roberts receiving orders directly from Simonds, the corps placed the Dragoons under the command of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division for this advance.²⁰⁹

With the Corps' reconnaissance unit again placed under the command of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, as had occurred throughout the first three weeks of August, a closer examination is required to understand why this was happening. Several indicators lead to the conclusion that despite this command relationship, the corps planned the Dragoons' tasks and employed them as its reconnaissance force. The most evident clue comes from Roberts, who stated that he received his tasks directly from the corps commander for this mission.²¹⁰ The division's written order also hints at this arrangement. First, the division's order outlines the Regiment's tasks in the corps' scheme of maneuver paragraph. Second, the Dragoons' tasks reflect those of a corps' reconnaissance unit—"carry out reconnaissance on as broad a front as possible to obtain information on the enemy disposition and knowledge of the terrain."²¹¹ Despite being attached to the 4th Canadian Division, the Dragoons still fulfilled, at least in part, a corps reconnaissance role.

²⁰⁸ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 75.

²⁰⁹ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Forty-Eight Period 21 1200 to 21 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

²¹⁰ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 75.

²¹¹ Summary of Instructions by GOC 4th Division 221800 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

If the Dragoons were tasked and employed by the corps, further explanation is required for why it was repeatedly under the command of the 4th Division. There are at least three reasons. First, the Dragoons traveled over 90 kilometers as quickly as possible for this advance. The corps likely attached the Regiment to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division to facilitate communications and logistical support over this distance. Second, with the 4th Armoured Division providing the combat forces to destroy any enemy identified by the Dragoons, this relationship improved efficiency as the corps headquarters was not an unnecessary intermediary through this exchange. Finally, the 4th Division's reconnaissance unit was already employed in an armoured regiment role. As a result, the division needed a reconnaissance element, which the Dragoons could simultaneously fulfill. This evidence leads to the conclusion that the Dragoons, although attached to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, was still the corps' reconnaissance element with its tasks primarily assigned by the corps commander. Yet, at times, for communication, efficiency, and secondary roles, it was placed under the command of the 4th Division.

On the morning of 23 August 1944, the XII Manitoba Dragoons began advancing with three squadrons abreast in what Roberts described as "the last great cavalry charge."²¹² Over the next three days, the Dragoons completed a 96-kilometer

²¹² This reference was due to most Armour Corps units previously being cavalry units. Further, the advance from the Seine River into Belgium was the operation that enabled the greatest degree, in his mind, of medium reconnaissance against a withdrawing enemy throughout the war; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 75.

reconnaissance, becoming the first British or Canadian unit to reach the Seine.²¹³ The primary means by which the Dragoons enabled the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's maneuver was by identifying crossing points over the many rivers along the axis of advance. This was essential for the overall success of the Canadian corps' advance as the withdrawing German troops had destroyed nearly all the existing bridges. One example of these efforts was on 24 August 1944 along the Risle River, where the Regiment found all the bridges damaged along the division's centerline. This river was too deep to ford and too wide to bridge by improvisation. Nevertheless, the Regiment searched for a crossing and found an intact bridge within the boundaries of a flanking unit.²¹⁴ With this crossing identified, the Regiment continued its reconnaissance, and the division changed its route, crossing at this alternate location the following day.²¹⁵ By covering as much terrain as possible, the Dragoons searched for intact bridges, damaged crossings that could be quickly repaired, or sites suitable for fording, enabling the corps to advance more rapidly towards its objectives.

Although finding wet gap crossings may not be as captivating as troops conducting an attack, this task was no less important, nor was it an easy accomplishment. By identifying crossing sites quickly, the Regiment provided information to pursue this

²¹³ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 29 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History XII of Manitoba Dragoons*, 29.

²¹⁴ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 28.

²¹⁵ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Fifty-Four Period 24 1200 to 24 2400 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 24 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 28.

withdrawing enemy rapidly. This allowed II Canadian Corps to maintain pressure on the disorganized enemy, providing the Germans little time to establish defensive positions and thereby reducing the number of destroyed bridges as a positive consequence.²¹⁶ As a result, the corps faced less-organized rear-guard positions, had improved maneuver to bypass German combat troops, and increased its ability to strike enemy sustainment elements in its rear. These conditions simultaneously reduced the enemy's combat effectiveness and friendly casualties.

Finding suitable crossing sites was a difficult assignment that required good judgment, innovation, and a lot of demanding work. Major rivers, such as the Seine or the Somme, were too deep and too wide for a hasty crossing and required the construction of a ferry or bridge if no intact crossing could be found. That said, northeast France had many small rivers that, if a hasty crossing was established, would significantly reduce the delay caused by these natural obstacles. On many occasions, the Dragoons searched these smaller rivers looking for suitable locations to cross. Once found, the lead armoured car raced across the near side of the river, slipping, churning mud, spraying water, but hopefully reaching the far side. Once there, soldiers used shovels, horses, metal tracks, chains, and physical exertion to bring the remaining vehicles across. It was not an easy accomplishment, and with no friendly troops to its front, the Dragoons performed these actions under the constant threat of enemy attack.²¹⁷ This function of the Dragoons was

²¹⁶ Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Military Training Pamphlet No. 60, *The Tactical Employment of Armoured Car and Reconnaissance Regiments: Part 4-The Reconnaissance Regiment* (London: The War Office, 1943), 22.

²¹⁷ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 27; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 76.

important, difficult, dangerous, and directly contributed to the success of Canadian operations.

Despite delays from the lack of bridges, the Dragoons reached the Seine on 25 August 1944. Although it was the first British or Canadian unit to do so, it was not the first Allied force. Upon arrival at the river, the Dragoons found its position occupied by the 2nd United States Armored Division.²¹⁸ In discussions, the allies determined that the two units had already seized some of each other's planned objectives.²¹⁹ Through the exchange of information, the Regiment informed the Canadian corps that Elbeuf was still under enemy control and articulated the location of United States forces to minimize the risk of friendly fire.²²⁰

The coordination with flanking units was another critical task completed by the Dragoons that has been underappreciated in the study of Canadian operations in northwest Europe. The Regiment noted a lack of information sharing amongst corps and army formations. As evidence, the Dragoons identified that the 2nd United States Armored Division crossed in front of both the British 12th and 30th Corps while advancing to the Seine, surprising Canadian and British forces upon their arrival.²²¹

²¹⁸ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Number Fifty-Five Period 25 0000 to 25 1200 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; Historical Section CAHQ, Report No. 183, 13.

²¹⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 25 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²²⁰ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 29.

²²¹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 25 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

Communication was difficult within a formation and was even more challenging between corps, armies, and army groups. The Dragoons operated in front of its corps on a broad front, often maintaining contact with flanking units. Accordingly, the corps leaders were better informed of the locations and activities of friendly forces through the Dragoons' efforts, contributing to better coordinated and synchronized maneuver across the Allied force.

Crossing the Seine and to the Somme

After the Dragoons arrived at the Seine, General Crerar, commander of the First Canadian Army, directed the II Canadian Corps to conduct a river crossing in the vicinity of Elbeuf.²²² While the corps constructed four crossing sites, the Dragoons concentrated in a wood line and waited for further orders.²²³ For two days, the Regiment focused internally by conducting personal and vehicle maintenance. This brief respite does not indicate that the corps had placed any less importance on the Dragoons. The Regiment was second in priority to cross the Seine once the ferries were operational, behind only the bridgehead force.²²⁴ Once the II Canadian Corps was east of the river, the Regiment would again lead the Canadian advance. In the meantime, the Regiment was afforded time for rest and reorganization.

²²² Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 183, 26.

²²³ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Outline Plan for Establishing Bridgehead Over River Seine, 26 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789; Historical Section CAHQ, Report No. 183, 26.

²²⁴ Instructions for Crossing River Seine, 27 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

These two days of rest also facilitated the XII Manitoba Dragoons to receive praise from Canadian leaders. General Crerar took advantage of this opportunity to personally visit the Dragoons and pass on his congratulations for the “fine job done” over the past few weeks.²²⁵ Having also received accolades from the commander of the II Canadian Corps that same day, the unit’s war diarist noted that it “pleased us greatly [as] words of praise from our corps commander are priceless.”²²⁶ These words of praise are the first indications of Canadian leaders acknowledging that the Dragoons were critical to II Canadian Corps operations. By the time the Regiment’s actions were complete in Belgium, it would receive even more explicit statements confirming this claim.

On 28 August 1944, the Dragoons crossed the Seine, and two days later, the First Canadian Army resumed its advance.²²⁷ Following orders from General Montgomery, it was to head northwards and quickly destroy all enemy forces along the coast of the English Channel in the direction of Bruges. Accordingly, the II Canadian Corps oriented towards Abbeville, 40-kilometers northwest of Amiens along the Somme River, and tasked the Dragoons to reconnoiter along the 4th Canadian Armoured Division’s front.²²⁸

²²⁵ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 27 August 1944t, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Confirmatory Notes GOC 4th Canadian Armoured Division Orders Group, 301100 August 1944, 4th CAD War Diary, vol. 13789.

²²⁸ Ibid.

With only 1:250,000 scale maps, which Roberts described as tourist maps, the Regiment began its advance on 30 August 1944 with all four squadrons forward.²²⁹

Over the next two days, the Regiment advanced 30 kilometers through several enemy rear-guard positions. This was a costly period for the Dragoons, who lost four armoured cars in one day alone.²³⁰ However, this slow, dangerous advance towards the Somme abruptly changed on the evening of 31 August 1944. Acting on General Montgomery's direction to advance rapidly towards the Somme, the 11th British Armoured Division broke out of the Seine bridgehead and traveled 60 miles in poor weather to reach the Somme.²³¹ Upon receiving this news, General Crerar immediately directed the II Canadian Corps, who the Dragoons would lead, to press towards Abbeville.²³²

Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts was summoned to corps headquarters for orders that evening. General Simonds decided to execute a night move through unreconnoitred territory on a single road. Roberts recalls his instruction—the lead “division would move at 0300 hours, led by the armoured car regiment.”²³³ Understanding the challenges of a

²²⁹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 31 August 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 81; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 31.

²³⁰ For comparison, the Regiment only lost 23 armoured cars throughout the entire war; Role of 18th Canadian Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), XII MD War Diary, vol. 14250.

²³¹ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 183, 59.

²³² Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 299.

²³³ With the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions tasked to seize the ports cities of Dieppe and Le Tréport, respectively, although the Dragoons were ahead of just the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, this was effectively leading the corps' advance. This

night move on a single road through non-permissive territory, Roberts adjusted the corps' direction and only assigned one squadron, vice the entire Regiment, to lead the advance. Further, he handpicked the lead troop commander for this task, understanding he needed his best officer for this challenging mission.²³⁴

At 0030 hours, D Squadron crossed the start line towards Abbeville, immediately followed by one infantry company from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada.²³⁵ Despite an enemy defensive position causing a delay, the Dragoons reached Abbeville early on 2 September 1944.²³⁶ With the eastern bank of the Somme still held by the enemy, the Dragoons proceeded no further.²³⁷ That said, this bold 26-hour move enabled the 21st Army Group to regain its symmetry. At this point, the First Canadian Army occupied the northern sector of the army group's advance along the English Channel. To its south was the Second British Army, who were immediately north of the First United States Army. With the First Canadian Army reaching the river, it allowed the Second British Army, who were experiencing very little resistance, to continue its advance towards Arras and ultimately Antwerp in the following days.²³⁸

clarifies why Roberts indicated he received his instructions from Simonds, yet the Dragoons are also included in the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's operation order.

²³⁴ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 78–79.

²³⁵ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 1 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 83.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 300; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 83.

²³⁸ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 298.

The overnight, rapid advance to the Somme demonstrates several themes of the Dragoons' operations in northwest Europe. First, it again highlighted the still limited understanding of an armoured car regiment by the II Canadian Corps. Placing the entire Regiment along a single road provided no increased protection over a single squadron, as the Regiment could not disperse its forces across the formation's front. Further, the remainder of the Dragoons could have verified alternate routes for use if the main road was unpassable. However, neither the corps nor Roberts selected this option. Despite the lack of understanding by the corps, Roberts again altered the corps' plan to ensure his Regiment was more effectively employed. The result was as expected. The Dragoons successfully led the advance of another operation, demonstrating its importance to the II Canadian Corps.

Leading the Corps to the Leopold Canal

After reaching the Somme, the II Canadian Corps continued advancing along the English Channel oriented on Bruges. Although elements of the 15th German Army were in a defensive position within the First Canadian Army's boundaries, the Second British Army advanced nearly unopposed towards Antwerp. With British forces threatening to envelop the German force, the enemy abandoned their defenses along the Somme in the Canadian sector.²³⁹ On 4 September 1944, the II Canadian Corps resumed its advance across the Somme with two divisions forward, the 1st Polish Armoured Division south, and the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division north. Their objective was the Scheldt Estuary.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 324.

²⁴⁰ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 183, 62.

For this advance, the Dragoons were brought back under the corps' command and incorporated into its scheme of maneuver.²⁴¹ The Dragoons' task was to advance between the two divisions, maintaining contact with each formation and clearing any enemy.²⁴²

The Regiment's task of securing the area between two divisions' movement was necessary. Yet, this again shows the lack of understanding of the potential of an armoured car regiment by Canadian leaders. Both the 1st Polish and 3rd Canadian Divisions had integral reconnaissance units in this situation. But, these close reconnaissance forces focused on collecting information used to seize the divisions' objectives. As underlined by the Dragoons' historian, the divisions often were over-fixated on destroying the enemy in their objectives, which prevented the space between divisions from being considered clear.²⁴³ As a result, the Dragoons ensured the entire Canadian area was free of enemy by operating in the space between the divisions.

Nevertheless, this location was not optimal for the corps to advance towards the Scheldt as quickly as possible. Had the Regiment been tasked in front of the divisions, it

²⁴¹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 4 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁴² Although tasked on 3 September 1944 and the remainder of the corps starting their advance on the 4th, likely due to traffic congestion at the crossing site, the Dragoons do not start their move until the morning of 5 September. The II Canadian Corps War Diary stated that the corps commander was prevented from visiting these forward divisions on the afternoon of the 4th due to traffic primarily caused by the 1st Polish Armoured Division; II Canadian Corps War Diary Entry, 4 September 1944, II Canadian Corps, "G Branch War Diary," September-October 1944, RG24, C17, vol. 13713, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700. (Hereafter referred to as II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713).

²⁴³ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 34.

would have found enemy across the entire corps' sector, including between division boundaries. This alternate location also had the increased benefit of fostering quicker movement. The divisions would strike enemy pockets located by the Dragoons yet make best speed where no enemy existed. The Dragoons, not stalled while a division destroyed enemy positions, would also identify impassable terrain and suitable by-pass locations before a division's arrival, preventing unnecessary delay for these large, more challenging to move formations.

Despite less than optimal corps orders, Roberts again used his initiative to have his Regiment employed more effectively. While initially directed to advance in-between the lead divisions, two days into the advance, the corps' situation report stated the Dragoons "carried out reconnaissance on whole corps front."²⁴⁴ It appears that Roberts, using his understanding of an armoured car regiment, adjusted—perhaps immediately—his unit's task to better enable the corps' plan. In his memoir, Roberts stated that he had the Regiment advance on a "very wide front" right away, although he made no indication this was a change from the direction he received.²⁴⁵ Roberts' expertise placed the Dragoons in an improved location, positively affecting the corps' advance from the Somme to the Scheldt Estuary.

Once leading the corps' advance, the Dragoons continued to be a crucial part of the Canadian's success. From 5 to 7 September, the Regiment advanced 100 kilometers

²⁴⁴ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 12, 8 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁴⁵ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 83.

from the Somme to the area around Dunkirk.²⁴⁶ This distance is notable, particularly when one considers the delaying actions of the withdrawing German forces. There are repeated entries within the II Canadian Corps' radio logs describing difficulties the Dragoons faced due to destroyed bridges. Between 5 and 6 September 1944, the Regiment informed corps headquarters of seven different crossing locations along the axis of advance that were no longer suitable. Yet, each report also provided an alternate location found by the Dragoons.²⁴⁷ With Roberts adjusting the Regiment to the front of the corps' advance, the unit minimized the delay resulting from the destroyed bridges, increasing the speed of the corps' advance to the Scheldt Estuary.

²⁴⁶ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 5-7 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁴⁷ II Canadian Corps Operations Log, 5-6 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

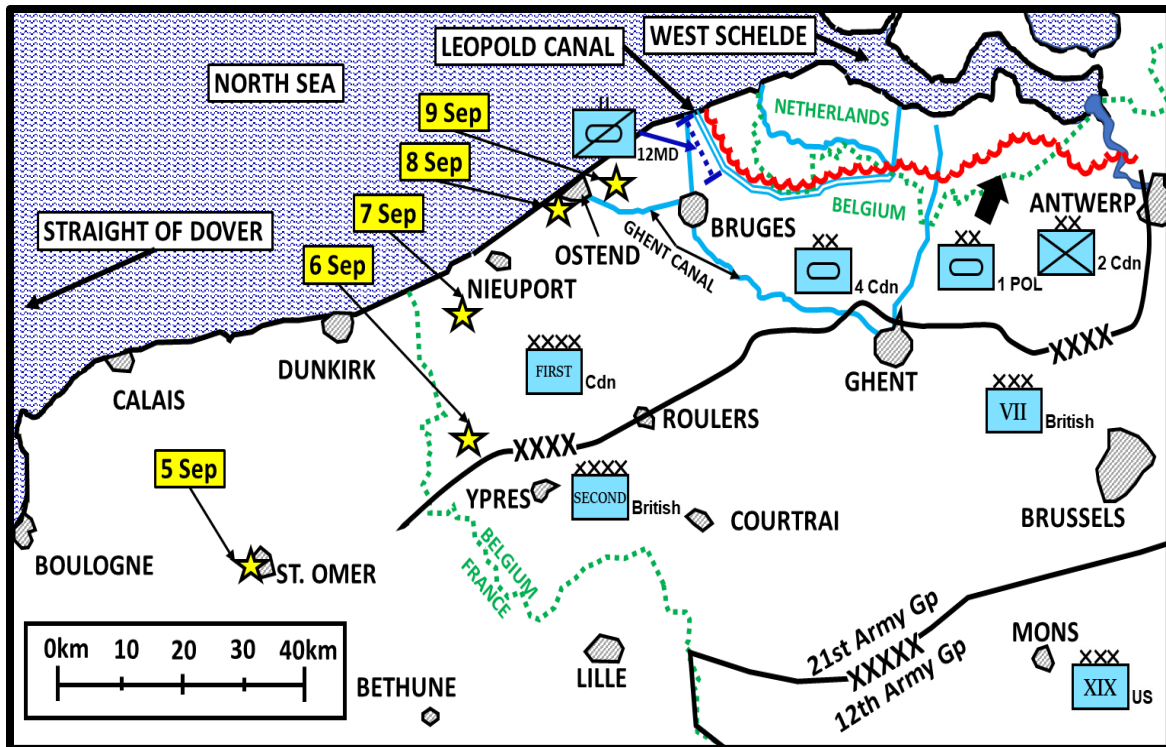


Figure 9. XII Manitoba Dragoons' Location along Leopold Canal, 21 September 1944

Source: Created by the author using 4th Canadian Division Outline Plan, 21 September 1944, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, "General Staff War Diary," August-December 1944, RG24, C3, vol. 13789, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Research Knowledge Network, accessed 21 November 2021, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_mikan_133700.

Supplying information that improved the corps' maneuver was not the only advantage the Dragoons provided during this operation. From 7 to 9 September 1944, the Regiment played a pivotal role in the actions at Dunkirk, Ostend, and Bruges. On the morning of 7 September 1944, the Dragoons, less A Squadron who was attached to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division the previous day,²⁴⁸ began its advance towards

²⁴⁸ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 13, 6 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 6 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

Dunkirk.²⁴⁹ There was excitement surrounding Dunkirk's potential seizure as a port location for the Allies, who up to this point were still receiving their supplies from ships offloaded in Normandy.²⁵⁰ Unfortunately, while two squadrons from the Dragoons attempted to encircle Dunkirk, they came under heavy enemy fire along every route leading into the city.²⁵¹ Determining this situation was not suitable for armoured cars, the Dragoons observed this key location until relieved by the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division the following day.²⁵²

With Dunkirk contained by other II Canadian Corps elements, on 8 September 1944, the Regiment continued towards the city of Ostend.²⁵³ Another port city along the English Channel, the corps assigned Ostend the code-name "Gold" due to its potential worth should this port be captured and provide supplies for the Allied fight. When the Dragoons approached the town, it again came under German artillery fire, which forced its withdrawal. Despite this setback, thanks to a combination of the Regiment's communication abilities, understanding of the entire corps' plan, and a little luck, the Dragoons' seized the city on its second attempt. A Squadron, still attached to the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, was in the vicinity of Bruges and established contact with

²⁴⁹ Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 35.

²⁵⁰ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 87.

²⁵¹ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 19, 8 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁵² XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 8 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; Henry, *Regimental History of XII Manitoba Dragoons*, 35.

²⁵³ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 8 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

the Belgium resistance movement, called the “White Brigade.” A resistance member indicated that Ostend was only lightly defended and provided a link-up point with a local resistance leader.²⁵⁴ A Squadron, understanding the remainder of the Dragoons were attempting to seize this city, passed this information to the Regiment’s headquarters. The Dragoons near Ostend met with the local resistance leader, who directed the Regiment to a route that was free of enemy into the city.²⁵⁵ By 1530 hours, Ostend was captured without a shot fired and met with celebration from its citizens.²⁵⁶ This quick action also ensnared some German engineers before they could demolish the harbor. As a result, much-needed supplies of stores and bulk petrol began flowing through Ostend on 28 September 1944.²⁵⁷

Although A Squadron was detached from the Regiment, it also demonstrated skill in liberating cities. On 8 September 1944, the squadron conducted a reconnaissance of its division’s centerline and obtained information on the defense of Bruges through observation and by speaking to civilians.²⁵⁸ On 12 September 1944, after noticing a lack

²⁵⁴ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 50, 8 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁵⁵ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 25, 8 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁵⁶ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 38, 8 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713; II Canadian Corps Situation Report 128 Period up to 091200 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁵⁷ Government of Canada, “The Liberation of Belgium,” Veterans Affairs Canada, last modified 23 January 2020, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/battles-and-stages/liberation-of-belgium>; Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 87.

²⁵⁸ 4th Canadian Armoured Division Situation Report Eight Two Period 081200 to 082400 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

of German forces in the city, A Squadron entered Bruges to find that the enemy had withdrawn without contesting the city.²⁵⁹ This action received one of the few mentions of the Dragoons in the Canadian Army's official history.²⁶⁰ Perhaps this action did not have great tactical significance; however, the emotional impact on the people of Belgium was considerable. That same day, the Burgomaster of Bruges requested a thank-you message be sent to the Prime Minister of Canada for the actions of Canadian soldiers in saving his city.²⁶¹ The citizens of Bruges also did not overlook the Regiment's actions. Four years to the day after the Dragoons entered Bruges, the city dedicated a bridge, now known as Canada Bridge, adorned with two large bison at its entrance in honor of the Regiment's cap badge.²⁶²

The advance from the Somme into Belgium is arguably the Canadian Army's greatest example of an armoured car regiment executing its envisioned task—leading the pursuit against a withdrawing enemy. Further, the Dragoons' actions of securing the port

²⁵⁹ II Canadian Corps Advanced Headquarters Operations Log serials 18, 20, 12 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 12 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁶⁰ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 329; This mention of the Regiment is overshadowed in the official history by the actions of the 4th Infantry Brigade who enter the city following the Dragoons. To perhaps minimize this overshadowing, Stacey wrote in the footnote that this squadron was "hard-driving...at times, it was up to 40 miles ahead of the division."

²⁶¹ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 34, 12 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁶² Postmedia News, "Stunning medieval city of Bruges offers Canadians a unique attraction in 'Bison Bridge,'" *National Post*, 21 April 2017, <https://nationalpost.com/travel/stunning-medieval-city-of-bruges-offers-canadians-a-unique-attraction-in-bison-bridge>.

city of Ostend and the historic city of Bruges had a beneficial effect on the operational level of war for the First Canadian Army. However, these actions by the Dragoons are largely overlooked in historical study. Even within this paper, its contents are summarized in just a few pages. This again highlights the difficulties in studying reconnaissance history. The actions by the Dragoons positively affected corps operations, yet quantifying these benefits proves difficult. Without over-repeating the importance of identifying suitable crossing sites and briefly highlighting the most important liberation stories of the Dragoons, this qualitative assessment best demonstrates the importance of the unit's actions during this period.

Containment along the Leopold Canal

After seizing the city of Ostend on 9 September 1944, the II Canadian Corps directed the Dragoons to continue its advance the following morning and re-establish contact with the withdrawing enemy.²⁶³ Once reaching the Brugge-Zeebrugge Canal, the Regiment described a 100-yard wide river covered by German artillery and anti-tank guns.²⁶⁴ Over that day, the Dragoons found all the bridges blown and several enemy defensive positions comprised of 50-75 soldiers each.²⁶⁵ Roberts described in his memoir

²⁶³ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 87–89.

²⁶⁴ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 27, 10 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁶⁵ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 47, 10 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

that it was clear the Germans intended to hold the canal from well-defended strong points. He lamented that the “last great cavalry charge was over.”²⁶⁶

Over the next several days, the II Canadian Corps took responsibility from the city of Ghent, east to the Dutch border, then north to the North Sea.²⁶⁷ General Montgomery directed the First Canadian Army to defeat German forces in the Scheldt region to enable Allied forces to use Antwerp’s port to support onward movement into Germany.²⁶⁸ These actions required significant combat power. Hence General Simonds could not afford to task large amounts of his armour or infantry to protect the canals. With a 57 kilometer front, the Dragoons played a critical role in its defense, with the corps directing the Regiment to “take as much of the canal line as possible.”²⁶⁹ Accordingly, the Regiment crossed the Bruges Canal and established an observation line approximately 20 kilometers long on the Leopold Canal, from the 4th Canadian Armoured Division’s left flank to the sea.²⁷⁰ The Regiment, reporting that the enemy had “considerably thickened” defenses along this canal, remained in this location for the next month and a half, culminating seven weeks of offensive operations.²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ Roberts, *The Canadian Summer*, 87–89.

²⁶⁷ Historical Section, CAHQ, Report No. 183, 89.

²⁶⁸ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 357.

²⁶⁹ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 31, 15 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁷⁰ II Canadian Corps Operation Order to Clear Area by West Schelde, 12 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248; II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 3, 15 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁷¹ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serials 4, 23, 15 September 1944 II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713; Dragoons reported enemy dug in and strengthening their

Although the Regiment's offensive operations were temporarily on hold, its work was no less important for the II Canadian Corps. Along the Leopold Canal, the Dragoons executed a "containing role," not to be confused with the infantry task it fulfilled in July 1944 around Caen. The term "containing" described the task of maintaining contact with a static enemy, normally with a natural obstacle between the two forces and where no major attack is imminent.²⁷² Its purpose was to provide early warning of enemy attacks and prevent enemy patrols from getting information on friendly forces.²⁷³ The most significant difference between this role and the Dragoons previous task of defending as dismounted infantry were the actions if attacked. In the containing role, soldiers mounted their vehicles and fought delaying actions, where infantry would attempt to hold the ground and destroy the enemy.²⁷⁴

Along the Leopold Canal, a formidable natural obstacle, the Dragoons adopted static observation posts, patrolling between locations and the surrounding areas.²⁷⁵ This allowed the Regiment to thinly spread its forces over a considerable distance, much greater than if in a dismounted infantry role. Conversely, this task provided less

positions, up to 1000 soldiers in a certain area; XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 29 October 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁷² XII Manitoba Dragoons—The Employment of an Armoured Car Regiment, Amendment No. Three, 31 January 1945, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Role of 18 Canadian Armoured Car Regiment (XII Manitoba Dragoons), n.d, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14250.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

protection to the friendly troops behind the Dragoons' line, a risk requiring a commander's consideration.

This type of task was suitable for an armoured car regiment. Like a "guard" task in current Canadian or United States doctrine, it allowed the Dragoons to relieve infantry units for rest, regrouping, or employment elsewhere. Moreover, due to the Regiments' armoured cars' mobility and its ability to communicate over large distances, this task played to the strengths of an armoured car regiment. However, although still capable of early warning for a major enemy attack, small enemy patrols could infiltrate the Regiment's lines, particularly when the distance between observation posts was large.

Accordingly, the Germans exploited the Regiment's 20-kilometer frontage, raising Roberts' level of concern. Nearly every night, the Dragoons reported enemy patrols infiltrating its observation line.²⁷⁶ They thwarted some, but it was impossible to prevent them all. Roberts felt compelled to inform the chief of staff of the II Canadian Corps of this concern.²⁷⁷ He penned a letter to the corps on 17 September 1944, receiving a handwritten reply from the chief of staff two days later. In the response, the corps acknowledged the risk assumed by the commander, which he assessed as low, and

²⁷⁶ II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 33, 16 September 1944 II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713; II Canadian Corps Operations Log Serial 4, 17 September 1944, II Cdn Corps War Diary, vol. 13713.

²⁷⁷ Letter to Chief of Staff II Canadian Corps from Commanding Officer XII Manitoba Dragoons, 'Situation as of 172000', 17 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

underscored how this was necessary as both 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions were required to clear the enemy from the Scheldt Estuary.²⁷⁸

Interestingly, this letter also provides two clues into the relationship between the II Canadian Corps and the XII Manitoba Dragoons. First, the letter began with the comments that “you may feel that because you seldom hear from us that your unit is forgotten at times!”²⁷⁹ It then closes with “good luck, and don’t fail to shout about any forgetfulness or neglect on our part.” These comments are telling, for the corps essentially admits to not providing a lot of direction to the Dragoons during its operations. This theme and how Roberts aptly filled the gap is repeated throughout this paper, but this is the clearest example of the corps acknowledging its accuracy. The corps’ statements also highlights how it trusted Roberts’ to use his unit in the best manner to support the corps, negating the need for a lot of direction.

Perhaps even more important, this letter highlights the complete evolution of the Dragoons. Just seven weeks earlier, the Regiment was held in reserve with corps leaders unsure how to use it outside its medium reconnaissance role. Now, the corps’ chief of staff stated how he “tended to heap tasks upon [the Dragoons] comparable to those given [to] brigades or even divisions.”²⁸⁰ This is about as clear a statement one would expect to prove that the II Canadian Corps believed the XII Manitoba Dragoons were critical to its

²⁷⁸ Letter to Commanding Officer XII Manitoba Dragoons from Chief of Staff II Canadian Corps, 19 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248

²⁷⁹ Letter from Chief of Staff II Canadian Corps, 19 September 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

operations. Every unit within the II Canadian Corps had its role, all collectively important for achieving mission success. The recognition by the corps that the Dragoons' actions, although it may only receive a passing glance by academics and historians, were comparable to formations three to nine times its size must have filled the unit with pride. It is clear the Dragoons, and the remainder of the corps' leaders, understood the Regiment's actions directly contributed to the success of the II Canadian Corps.

The Dragoons remained along the Leopold Canal until 29 October 1944.²⁸¹ In a fitting conclusion to this period of the war, the day prior, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts, due to his performance, was promoted and assumed command of the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade.²⁸² The Regiment's second-in-command, Major Pat Black, replaced him, yet the timing symbolizes the end of the Dragoons' initial transformation. Having commanded the Regiment for a year and a half, Roberts transformed the Dragoons, both in terms of quality of troops and within the eyes of the II Canadian Corps, into a capable force that helped Canadian leaders win battles. Although receiving little notoriety today in academia or within the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps, Roberts' actions left a legacy that undoubtedly continues within the Canadian Army today.

The period from Falaise to reaching the Leopold Canal brings to focus how the XII Manitoba Dragoons were critical to the II Canadian Corps' operations. Building upon the trust gained by the Regiment's actions during Operation Totalize and Tractable, the

²⁸¹ XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 29 October 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

²⁸² XII Manitoba Dragoons War Diary Entry, 28 October 1944, XII MD War Diary, vol. 14248.

Dragoons were a central figure in the corps' planning throughout this period. Although Canadian leaders were still developing their understanding of this unit, Roberts, as he had the previous month, used his expertise in armoured reconnaissance to adjust the Dragoons' tasks to best support the corps. As a result, the Dragoons led the advance into Belgium, increasing the corps' speed, and raced to liberate critical cities along the English Channel and the North Sea. Once at the Leopold Canal, the Regiment occupied the space of a brigade, freeing combat soldiers to rest and attack German forces who were preventing the opening of the port of Antwerp. By the end of this period of the war, II Canadian Corps leaders praised the Dragoons for its actions and importance to the corps' operations.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Unquestionably we have, in these few days, justified our existence as a unit and my confidence in you all has been amply confirmed. The GOC and the Corps Commander have also expressed to me their appreciation of the bold and accurate job which has been done by the Regiment and I want you to know how proud and pleased I am with your work.

—LTC J. A. Roberts, CO XII Manitoba Dragoons
Letter To Be Read To All Troops, 12 August 1944

In May 1941, the Canadian military mobilized the XII Manitoba Dragoons, activating this Non-Permanent Active Militia unit. This started a series of events that, when examined, revealed an unexplored challenge within World War II Canadian Army leadership, discovered a heretofore unrecognized influencer within the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps' history, and illuminated a unit that has not yet received the attention it deserves. Initially assigned as the reconnaissance element for an infantry division, the Dragoons' evolution over the next three and a half years exemplifies the turbulent integration of armoured reconnaissance into the Canadian Army. First converted into an armoured division's reconnaissance element, the Regiment ultimately became one of only two corps-level armoured car regiments within the First Canadian Army. As a result, the Dragoons shifted focus and built a level of understanding of the tactics of this newly conceived unit. However, this transformation was only the beginning to its story.

Once on the beaches in Normandy in July 1944, II Canadian Corps leaders lacked a thorough understanding of an armoured car regiment beyond its designed exploitation or pursuit role. This deficiency is exposed when examining the Dragoons' actions from Normandy until it reached the Scheldt Estuary in September 1944. Fortunately, an

overlooked prominent figure appeared in the history of the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps. The Dragoons' commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts, emerged as the II Canadian Corps' leading expert for armoured reconnaissance. He used his position to transform the Dragoons from a unit solely used in a pursuit role into a versatile force that directly supported commanders' decision-making. Through his blueprint for integrating a new capability into a force, lessons can be drawn that remain applicable today.

By October 1944, Canadian leaders praised the Dragoons for its positive influence on II Canadian Corps operations. Although there are few mentions of the Dragoons in the current academic study of Canadian military history, this Regiment was critical to II Canadian Corps' operations. Through information provided by the Dragoons on the terrain, enemy, and friendly forces, commanders had improved situational understanding that led to increased corps' speed and better decisions. The absence of this critical unit in the study of Canadian history should be noteworthy to a Canadian military professional. If the Dragoons' story remains largely untold, it is indicative that there is far more to discover once more of Canada's armoured reconnaissance history is explored.

Lack of Armoured Reconnaissance Understanding

When the XII Manitoba Dragoons landed on the beaches of Normandy, it entered a battlefield not suited for an armoured car regiment in its designed medium reconnaissance role. With this constraint, the Regiment's initial operational task as infantry in the defense of Caen is understandable. That said, once the II Canadian Corps broke out of Normandy, it is evident that the corps had a limited view of the employment of an armoured car regiment. Despite identifying a much broader range of tasks for the Dragoons during pre-war training, initially during combat, the II Canadian Corps solely

saw the Regiment employed in exploitation or pursuit roles following a breach in an enemy's defensive line.²⁸³ Unfortunately, this narrow view of the Regiment prevented the Dragoons from positively affecting the Corps' operations in July 1944. During both Operations Atlantic and Spring, the Dragoons were held in reserve, awaiting an opportunity to exploit a penetration of the German defenses. As the Allied forces did not break through the German lines, the Regiment sat idle for nearly two weeks. Although these two operations were plagued with an inaccurate understanding of the battlefield within the corps headquarters, its leaders did not employ the Regiment in reconnaissance or flank protection roles. In either task, the Regiment would have reduced these frictions, increasing the likelihood of success for these operations.

By the beginning of August 1944, both the First Canadian Army headquarters and the 4th Canadian Armoured Division became operational within France. Tasked to attack towards Falaise, which became known as Operation Totalize, II Canadian Corps leaders continued to demonstrate a lack of appreciation for the capabilities of the Dragoons. At the start of this operation, the Regiment found itself again held in the rear, awaiting an opportunity to exploit success. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts was able to alter the Dragoons' task to flank protection which had an immediate positive effect on the corps' operations. This allowed Canadian corps leaders to see the Regiment's value beyond its exploitation role, resulting in the increased utilization of the Dragoons from this point forward.

²⁸³ Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, 168.

After fighting surrounding Falaise was complete, II Canadian Corps leaders' understanding of an armoured car regiment was increasing, yet problems continued to exist. For example, while pursuing withdrawing German forces into Belgium, the commander of the Canadian corps directed the entire Regiment to lead the advance along a single road. This decision lacked the understanding that a whole unit provided no increased protection in single file over a smaller group with infantry support close behind. Further, once the Corps spread out across the Somme, the Dragoons were initially tasked to advance in-between the two lead divisions. Although the Regiment was to clear missed enemy, an important task, the Dragoons could accomplish more than this mission when operating in front of the corps. For instance, from this position, the Dragoons could identify alternate routes for impassible terrain before a division's arrival, preventing an unnecessary delay. Additionally, the Regiment would identify enemy locations and areas where no threat existed. As a result, the divisions could move rapidly through territory previously verified free of German forces, fostering quicker corps movement.

Highlighting these shortcomings is not an attack on the II Canadian Corps' leaders. The Canadian military identified armoured car regiments for a corps reconnaissance role just one year before the corps became operational in France. With corps leaders focused on preparing for combat operations, there was insufficient time to master the employment of this new capability. That said, military professionals should see parallels of this history in today's environment. Competing priorities for an individual's time make learning every emerging military capability difficult. However, should a military leader arrive in combat lacking an understanding of new technologies or

units, their initial success on the battlefield will prove more difficult. Military leaders must take the time to master every new aspect of their craft.

Roberts' Influence on Canadian Reconnaissance History

Through the study of the Dragoons' actions in northwest Europe, Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts emerged as a central figure in the early development of Canadian armoured reconnaissance. Having spent several years dedicating himself to understanding the abilities of an armoured car regiment, he was a credible and leading voice for the employment of his unit. This was immediately evident upon the Dragoons' arrival in Normandy. After a short period as infantry on the outskirts of Caen, the Regiment was held in reserve during Operations Atlantic and Spring, awaiting a breakthrough in the German lines. During this period, Roberts visited corps headquarters every day, seeking more valuable employment. Although unsuccessful in these early attempts to better employ his Regiment, Roberts was not deterred.

At the onset of Operation Totalize, the II Canadian Corps held the Dragoons behind the lead brigades awaiting an opportunity to exploit success. Not in reserve, Roberts used the expertise he had amassed throughout pre-war training, studying armoured car action in North Africa, and writing his unit's tactical manual, to seize an opportunity to adjust his task to a flank protection role. From this position, the Regiment had immediate positive effects on operations. The Dragoons provided information on flanking units and the enemy outside the corps' boundaries. Further, after losing communications with a battlegroup, the Regiment was tasked to conduct special reconnaissance, providing required information for the division commander to adjust his

plan. Roberts' actions highlighted to II Canadian Corps' leadership that he understood armoured car regiment tactics and should be trusted to employ his unit appropriately.

During the corps' advance from Falaise to the Scheldt Estuary, Roberts began to be treated as a subject matter expert within the II Canadian Corps on armoured car operations. Despite weak plans from the II Canadian Corps, placing the Dragoons between the lead divisions, Roberts ensured the Regiment led the Canadian advance through this period so it could most optimally contribute to the corps' operation. From this improved position, the Dragoons found suitable crossings for the many rivers of northwest Europe, liberated several cities and towns, and coordinated with flanking units, all enhancing the ability of Canadian commanders to make decisions.

Roberts' ability to effectively integrate a new capability into military operations illuminates lessons applicable to today's military leaders. First, become an expert in your field. With Roberts' sound understanding of his new units' capabilities, he was in a position to amend the corps' plans to employ his Regiment throughout all types of operations better. The second lesson is to be persistent. Despite working groups and exercises created to integrate an armoured car regiment into a corps' operations, Canadian leaders struggled to employ this new capability effectively. Nevertheless, Roberts did not stop attempting to improve his Regiment's tasks or his superiors' understanding. Eventually, a small opportunity presented itself, which Roberts seized. Once employed correctly, the Dragoons' worth spoke for itself. By being an expert and having a patient, yet tenacious attitude towards the increased inclusion of his unit into the corps' operations, Roberts successfully integrated this new concept into the Canadian Army.

Critical Role of the XII Manitoba Dragoons

Guided by the expertise of Lieutenant-Colonel Roberts, the XII Manitoba Dragoons became critical to the II Canadian Corps' operations. Upon its arrival in France in July 1944, with corps leaders lacking the understanding of an armoured car regiment, the Dragoons provided minimal value to the corps. That changed during Operation Totalize, where the Dragoons demonstrated that when employed outside an exploitation or pursuit role, it provided information to the corps that greatly assisted their understanding of the battlefield. From this point forward, the Dragoons became increasingly more important to operations. These actions were an inflection point in the unit's history and Canadian armoured reconnaissance history at large.

The Dragoons' transformation continued during Operation Tractable. A reconnaissance report by the Regiment that reported withdrawing enemy to the west of the II Canadian Corps' boundaries reached General Simonds. Based on this information, the corps commander initiated a shaping operation into this area that prepared the corps for the battle of the Falaise Gap. In addition, for the first time, the corps explicitly included the Dragoons into its plan in a flank protection role. During this task, the Regiment identified enemy for destruction, provided corps headquarters with information on friendly force actions to clarify situational understanding, and also did its fair share of engaging German soldiers. In just three weeks, the Regiment had transformed from a single-purpose unit, held in reserve until an exploitation opportunity presented itself, into a key component of the corps' plan.

From 22 August to 14 September 1944, the Dragoons advanced from the outskirts of Falaise for approximately 385 kilometers until it reached the Leopold Canal near the

Belgium-Netherlands border. Finally, in its designed role of medium reconnaissance pursuing a withdrawing enemy, the Dragoons performed as an armoured car regiment was primarily intended. The most substantial aspect of these operations was finding suitable crossings along the many rivers of northwest Europe. With the withdrawing German Army destroying bridges to impose a delay on the pursuing Allied force, the Dragoons raced ahead to find suitable crossings. With alternate routes identified before a lead division's arrival, the II Canadian Corps maintained its momentum, reducing the time to prepare German rear-guard defensive positions.

The Dragoons had other positive effects on corps operations during the pursuit into Belgium. As communication difficulties existed within the II Canadian Corps, these challenges were amplified when sharing understanding between corps, armies, and army groups. The Dragoons established contact with many flanking units, providing valuable information to the corps on the progress and location of British and American forces. In addition, the Dragoons liberated several cities that positively affected the operational level of the war effort. For example, the Regiment seized a nearly intact seaport in Ostend, a highly sought-after facility by Allied forces who were still receiving supplies from the Normandy beachhead.

Once at the Leopold Canal, the Regiment adopted a new role—contain German forces on the opposite side of this terrain feature. During this mission, the Regiment was employed within its strengths. Using the mobility of its armoured cars and long-range communication capabilities, the Dragoons covered a 20-kilometer front along the canal. These actions released two divisions within the II Canadian Corps to conduct offensive operations within the Scheldt Estuary, necessary for the Allied force to open the Antwerp

port. Before the Dragoons' task at the Leopold Canal finished at the end of October, the transformation of the Dragoons into a critical unit of the II Canadian Corps was complete. General Crerar and Simonds both expressed their appreciation for the Regiment's actions since the breakout from Normandy. Further, the corps' chief of staff sent Roberts a letter outlining his gratitude to the unit and how the Dragoons performed tasks equal to that of other brigades or divisions despite little direction from the corps' headquarters.

Despite its essential role in the II Canadian Corps' operations, the near absence of the XII Manitoba Dragoons in current academic study should be noteworthy to a Canadian military professional. With the Dragoons' story just starting to be told, there is much more to be discovered. Stepping back further, the evolution and intricacies of Canadian reconnaissance history at large also remain mostly untold. To better understand where Canadian reconnaissance should go in the future, one must better understand its origins. This story must be told.

Closing

With few secondary sources that speak specifically to the XII Manitoba Dragoons or Canadian armoured reconnaissance actions, this paper aimed to shed some light on this subject. However, with much of this history unexplored, this analysis merely scratches the surface and leaves many other areas to investigate. For example, the Dragoons documented its training, doctrine, and equipment challenges throughout the war. These subjects should be studied as the factors affecting the Dragoons' evolution likely remain relevant today. Further, a comparison between Canadian corps and division level reconnaissance units during the Second World War may highlight aspects relevant to

today as the Canadian Army reorients towards large-scale combat operations. Finally, comparing the Dragoons' evolution and that of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, the I Canadian Corps' reconnaissance unit, may better answer just how critical armoured car regiments were to corps operations.

On 31 December 1964, the XII Manitoba Dragoons were reduced to nil strength, retiring this unit into Canadian history.²⁸⁴ However, the Regiment's legacy remains within the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps. Lieutenant-Colonel Robert's early influence on the integration of armoured reconnaissance into Canadian operations began the evolution that continues today. Additionally, the inherent dispersed nature of reconnaissance operations meant that Roberts did not complete these critical missions himself. Instead, the vehicle crews and soldiers of the Regiment executed these essential tasks. Exploring the Regiment's actions in the late summer of 1944 shows how the Dragoons proved themselves critical to the II Canadian Corps, leaving its mark on Canadian history. Current soldiers should be proud of this heritage and motivated to continue this positive legacy into the future.

²⁸⁴ "12th Manitoba Dragoons," Government of Canada.

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