

IMAGES OF WAR

THE ROYAL ARMOURED CORPS IN THE COLD WAR 1946–1990

RARE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM WARTIME ARCHIVES



M P ROBINSON & ROB GRIFFIN

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We dedicate this work to all who served as volunteers or as National Servicemen in the Royal Armoured Corps during the Cold War, and to all attached REME personnel who served alongside them. It should never be forgotten that the Royal Armoured Corps lost many brave men through the forty-five years covered in this study, both in action and in training. This book is also dedicated to their memory.

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Dedication

We dedicate this work to all who served as volunteers or as National Servicemen in the Royal Armoured Corps during the Cold War, and to all attached REME personnel who served alongside them. It should never be forgotten that the Royal Armoured Corps lost many brave men through the forty-five years covered in this study, both in action and in training. This book is also dedicated to their memory.

Introduction

This book is a brief survey of a broad subject and describes the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) during the forty-five tense years after the Second World War. For most who were armoured vehicle crewmen in this period it will be remembered with some degree of nostalgia. For those looking upon this period for the first time, the material in this book gives a glimpse at the way of life in the Cold War era Royal Armoured Corps. Over the five decades covered, a great deal changed within the Corps and in the world at large. The British Army changed, and Britain herself changed beyond all recognition. The previous titles that cover this period of the Corps' history and various regimental journals were heavily consulted as references for this work. Major Kenneth Macksey MC and Lieutenant-Colonel George Forty OBE both wrote valuable research into the RAC and the Royal Tank Regiment which has formed an excellent basis for this study. We have also relied on the memoirs of soldiers who served in the Corps. In this age of internet, old comrades' organizations have found a new vitality and this mode of communication greatly facilitated researching this book. The authors have benefited from the generosity of many former soldiers of the RAC.

The RAC withered immediately after the Second World War, grew in the 1950s to its largest peacetime size and then shrank again with the rest of the army as budgets dictated. This book includes period photographs, most seen here for the first time, from the personal collections of its veterans. Every time the Corps was reduced in size from 1957 until the end of the Cold War it retained all the responsibilities of a larger force. Defending West Germany, in Asian jungles, in the deserts of the Middle East, in Northern Ireland or thundering across Canadian prairies, the men of the RAC served their sovereign and nation. This book cannot tell the story of every regiment or that of every station manned by the RAC. It touches on the larger events in the forty-five years after the Second World War and we hope it encourages the in-depth study of all RAC regiments. It is a humble tribute to all who have served in the Royal Armoured Corps – an organization that continues to evolve in the face of many challenges and still carries its responsibilities with the greatest professionalism.



The end of the Second World War, and the start of a new era. A group of recruits from one of the Training Regiments RAC photographed seated on a Churchill Mk.VII in 1946 at Lulworth. The Churchill is probably a vehicle returned from the continent, and exhibits repaired battle damage on the turret side. *(Brian Simpson)*



Trooper Peter Smith, 3rd Hussars, seen in typical working uniform overalls in 1956. The uniform had changed very little since 1945 and the cotton overalls worn in summer and 'pixie suit' worn in winter will be remembered to RAC men of the 1950s and 1960s. *(Peter Smith)*



Crews of the 17th/21st Lancers at rest in long grass during an exercise in 1951. A camouflaged Centurion can be seen in the background. The men wear a mixture of khaki and camouflage denim tank suits, and pixie suits. *(T. Denton)*

The life in an armoured regiment was not all about vehicle maintenance and preparing for war: A soldier might find himself assigned to any range of tasks, exciting or mundane. Trooper Tom Coates of the 3rd Carabiniers is seen here while assigned to driving around a Brigade Major RAC. *(T. Coates)*





Some of the turret crew of a 9th/12th Lancers Centurion Mk.13 seen in 1967 during a break in a summer training period in West Germany. (*Brian Clarke*)

A tank commander salutes while passing a saluting base emblazoned with Union Flags in 1952. This Centurion belonged to the 17th/21st Lancers and the occasion was the Queen's first birthday spent as a reigning sovereign. At this time the mailed fist was the emblem of the 6th Armoured Division, newly raised for service in West Germany. (*T. Denton*)





This group of troopers, NCOs and officers were photographed in the 1950s and show a variety of uniforms in use by RAC personnel at the time. A mixture of wartime and postwar battledress, Denison smocks and pixie suits are seen here. We can just about make out the cap badge of the Royal Horse Guards on some of the figures, so it may be from the period 1951–52 during the reconstitution of the 11th Armoured Division. It is very likely that many of these men were National Service conscripts. (*M.P. Robinson Collection with thanks to Dick Taylor*)

6th RTR Troopers boarding a plane for home in 1958. The 1950s were the first time that soldiers were moved in significant numbers by air, and they travelled armed in those days. (*Pete Dobson*)



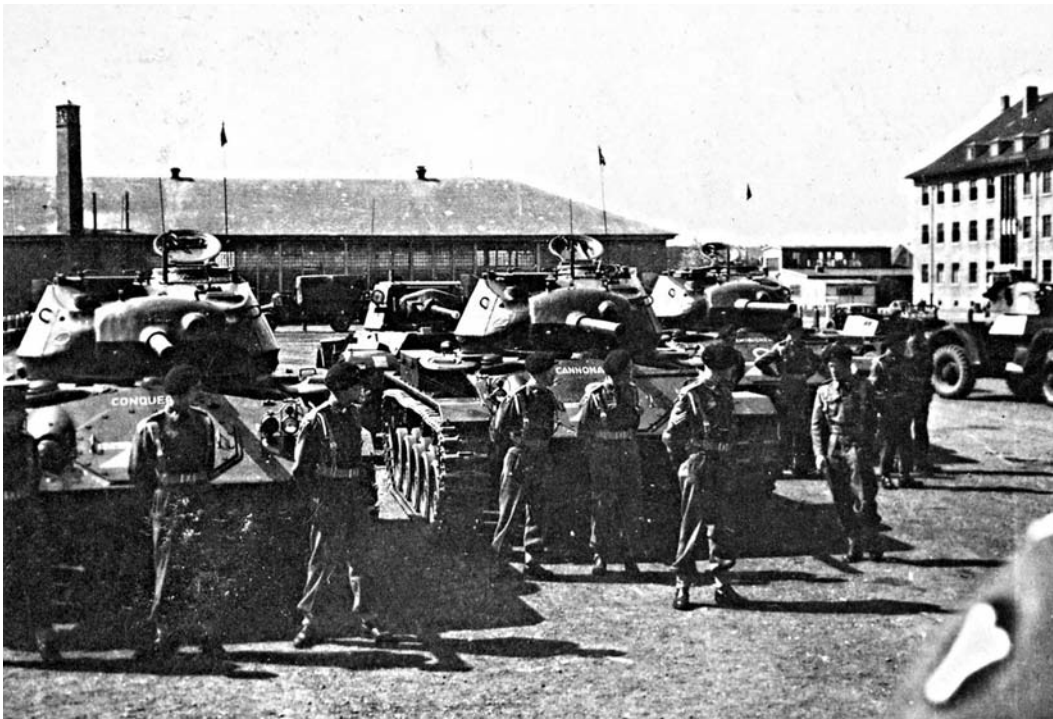
Chapter One

The Early Post-War Period

The Royal Armoured Corps (or RAC) was formed on the eve of war in 1939 from the battalions of the Royal Tank Corps and the mechanised regiments of cavalry. Six bloody years later the Axis lay defeated and Britain stood exhausted from campaigns fought around the globe. The army faced occupation duties in Europe, and the unpredictable burdens of keeping the peace in a far-flung empire. In August 1945 the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) was



The 1st Royal Tank Regiment on parade in Germany after the end of the war in Europe. The wartime RTR was a huge organization with twelve regular regiments and many other units raised for the duration. Some of these quickly disbanded RTR regiments returned as Territorial regiments in 1947. (MP Robinson Collection)



In 1947 the 13th/18th Hussars had some M24 Chaffee tanks on strength as well as armoured cars. During the winter of 1947, food and fuel shortages were the cause of some unrest in the local population. The tanks were eventually handed over to the 14th/20th Hussars, and the 13th/18th Hussars spent the remaining months of their occupation duty equipped with armoured cars. (John Jollivet)

reformed from the British occupation forces in northwest Germany. BAOR was to remain a constant factor for the RAC for most of the next fifty years. Outside of Europe, North Africa, India, Palestine, and Malaya had RAC units present in their army garrisons as well. The RAC's composition was unique in that it included the army's oldest cavalry regiments and the battalions of the Royal Tank Regiment, which dated only from the First World War. Old cavalry regiments with officers traditionally connected to the British establishment had throughout the Second World War been brigaded with the very junior units of the Royal Tank Regiment. The Royal Armoured Corps had some of Britain's best military minds in its officer corps, veteran commanders to lead the corps united through the turbulent peace. Many career officers in the Royal Armoured Corps had found themselves in the few years after the war's end with stark choices. Wartime regimental commanders often accepted lower rank to stay in the shrinking army, or left the service. A rapid turn-over of officers and NCOs came as wartime regiments disbanded and as the Python leave system took effect. In the next two years the number of available junior officers dwindled sharply in the entire army, creating a shortage of troop leaders in the RAC which was eventually resolved by conscription.¹

Attlee's government wanted to reduce the army and the size of the empire quickly. In late 1945 the army disbanded the Royal Reconnaissance Corps, the wartime RAC regiments raised from converted infantry regiments, and the territorial RTR regiments. Most of these



Two Humber scout cars of the 13th/18th Hussars parked at the barracks at Wolfenbuttel in 1946 or 1947. Also pictured in the background are a Daimler Armoured Car and one of the Chaffees. The 13th/18th Hussars finished the war with the 8th Armoured Brigade on Shermans, but within a year they were under orders of the 5th Infantry Division on armoured cars, with only enough men to form two squadrons. (*John Jollivet*)

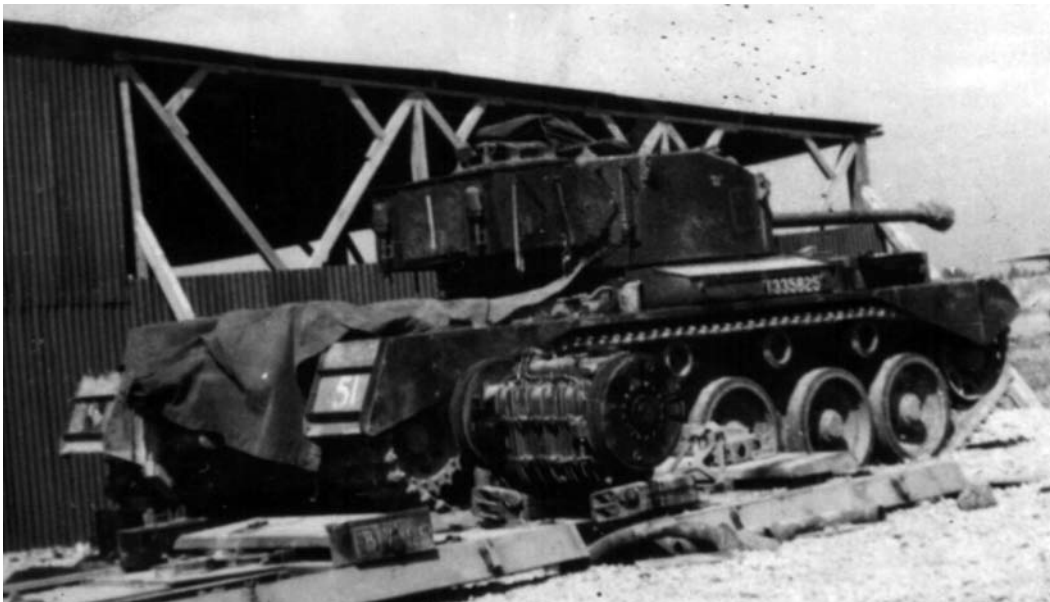
units had finished the war overseas – mainly in Italy, the Middle East, India or northern Europe. The rapid disbandment of these units led to some administrative difficulties and to the assignment of occupation duties throughout Europe to the remaining RAC regiments on the continent. In the last months of 1945 and for much of 1946 there was a whirlwind of personnel changes in the individual regiments, and many unit movements. The armoured units in the 8th Army and the 21st Army Group became widely dispersed across Western Europe in the course of occupation duties.

Occupation was very different from wartime armoured or reconnaissance operations. Regiments detached into squadrons in order to control large areas. Many regiments exchanged some (or all) of their tanks for armoured cars. Individual troops patrolled, hunting for caches of weapons and rounding up persons of interest. Temporary camps were set up – often in former enemy barracks. Wartime soldiers departed in a steady stream, and numbers were made up from disbanded regiments as an expedient. Even this didn't provide enough men for long, and many units manned only two of their sabre squadrons by the middle months of 1946. In the regiments themselves, time not spent on showing the flag or assisting displaced people was spent on honing peacetime skills or in sports. Bases were moved repeatedly, and it became hard to track changes in assignment as larger formations disappeared and areas returned to civil administration.²



A Comet of the 2nd Queen's Bays about to test its ditch crossing ability in Italy in 1946. The Bays were then part of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, 1st Armoured Division (along with the 4th RTR, 6th RTR and 9th Lancers). The 2nd Armoured Brigade's role in the area was to dissuade Tito's forces from attempting to advance into Trieste. The potential for violence was real; the British commander of the Pola district was assassinated by an Italian fascist in protest to the handover of Istria to the Yugoslavs in 1947. The Bays left Italy for Egypt in June 1947. (*Brian Simpson*)

The RAC in time of peace was controlled by the Director, Royal Armoured Corps (DRAC), and by the War Office, and they both needed to balance the needs of the army with those of the peacetime budget. The first post-war RAC Conference was held in late 1945. The RAC's senior officers and the War Office both made a concerted effort to determine the best ways to implement the structural lessons of the war while reducing the corps to a manageable size. The RAC's peacetime strength was set at twenty cavalry regiments and eight RTR regiments. Not everyone saw a rapid force reduction as a sensible move for British interests. At the 1946 Royal Armoured Corps conference Field-Marshal Montgomery himself argued that Britain's future security required a large post-war professional regular army backed by a large citizen reserve army. He proposed that Britain kept a regular army of two armoured divisions and four infantry divisions, with three additional independent armoured brigades. He envisioned a requirement for four RAC reconnaissance regiments for the regular infantry divisions, and four armoured car regiments as army troops. This force was to be manned by conscripts and by a smaller core of regulars. Monty's ideal regular army was backed up by a Territorial Army of two armoured divisions, three armoured brigades, seven RAC reconnaissance regiments



A Comet in course of a gearbox change during the Queen's Bays service in Palmanova, Italy in 1946. The Comet was generally a quick, reliable and maneuverable vehicle. In Libya drivers occasionally raced them for fun – a strictly unofficial pastime! (*Brian Simpson*)

(for seven infantry divisions) and four armoured car regiments. It would have been an army almost on a wartime scale.³

If combined with new equipment, Montgomery's proposal would have provided a strong force for intervention in Europe. He saw that the United States and Great Britain needed to keep large standing armies to discourage Soviet expansion westwards. Monty's vision ran against both the current of political thought and the economic realities of setting up a welfare state, but he could have had a crystal ball for the accuracy of his estimation of the army's needs... and of what was to come. The west had much to mistrust in the USSR's post-war policies. The reality was that the RAC needed to simultaneously shrink and modernise, in order to protect British interests at an acceptable cost. Shrink it did – at a rapid pace. By late 1946 the British Army in Europe had dwindled to three under-strength corps. By the end of the year the 7th Armoured Division was all that remained of the wartime armoured divisions, as the 11th had disbanded during the year. BAOR was reduced to a peacekeeping force for the next two years as Great Britain cast her eyes at her shrinking empire.

By 1947 only three nominal divisions remained in the areas under British control in Europe. Some regiments returning to Britain after years abroad were immediately redeployed as conflicts flared in Palestine and India. The regiments in the Middle East were stationed in Palestine, Egypt and Libya – in tanks and armoured cars. The Suez Canal, the main strategic concern in the area, was guarded on both the eastern and western sides by RAC units. There was a real risk of war with Jewish and Egyptian forces while Israel was established. As a result of misidentification Egyptian forces on several occasions opened fire on British armoured units on exercises in the eastern Sinai in 1946. The important areas where armoured forces were still deployed were all outside Europe – and all were associated to the strategic needs



Comet T-335919 with fitters sitting on the engine deck in the workshop area of the Bays' tank park in Fanara, Egypt in 1947. The Comet was a good vehicle for its time and replaced most of the British Shermans after the war. The Bays moved to Palestine, Egypt and Libya in 1947 and finally returned to England in October 1947. (Brian Simpson)

of the empire. Five regiments were still in India, and eight were serving in the Middle East (half of whom were equipped with armoured cars). Smaller detachments were located in Hong Kong and Japan. The 4th RTR was sent to Palestine in 1948 equipped with Comet tanks to protect the final British withdrawal from Israeli attacks. In Malaya, where communist agitation had been a threat since 1945, the 3rd RTR had a small presence (with the bulk of the regiment stationed in Hong Kong). In the same year the 4th Hussars joined them on a three year assignment in armoured cars as the situation in the colony became more serious.



Two Bays Comets at Fanara, Egypt, 1947. The armoured regiments abroad in the years immediately after the war mostly received Cromwell and Comet tanks, although the Sherman was retained by units in India until they returned to the United Kingdom. (Brian Simpson)



A Bays Comet at Fanara, Egypt in 1947. The Comet was only used in North West Europe during the war but saw worldwide service thereafter: *(Brian Simpson)*

It became impossible to keep a large enough force to intervene in Europe after 1946 while the army's budget shrank and its numbers dwindled. During this period the RAC's BAOR commitment was a weak force of six armoured regiments, which represented the only full strength regiments in the corps. For the five years leading up to the Korean War, manpower resources were pulled in so many directions that the supply of men could not keep pace with the British Army's needs. The RAC was doomed to suffer from manpower shortages with the rest of the army. The government and the General Staff were aware of the need to re-equip, but the process had a slow start while larger issues were addressed. Prime Minister Attlee's government broke with established traditions by creating a separate Ministry of Defence in 1947. This was significant because the Prime Minister had usually combined the Defence Minister's portfolio with his own, although the War Office continued to dictate military policy. The simplification of controlling the army was a positive move that made decision making more efficient. The Royal Armoured Corps also rationalised its establishment, improving administrative functions at its Bovington Centre.

The Labour government introduced National Service, as a military conscription period of eighteen months; this lasted until 1960. National Service changed the character of the Royal Armoured Corps and resulted in its sudden expansion. During the war designated training regiments supplied trained recruits to the RAC and this system continued with the 65th, 66th, 67th and 68th Training Regiments, who trained new intakes for the first years of National Service. The corps eventually met its manpower needs with national servicemen, many of whom became excellent soldiers. Officers could not be produced as quickly. The War Office, in response to its large losses of officers to demobilisation, revised its Army Reserve of Officers in 1948. It invited reserve officers to join either the Regular Army Reserve of Officers or the Army Officers Emergency Reserve. It also invited former officers with less than ten years of service, or officers who had taken wartime emergency commissions (and former officers of the Indian Army), to join the Territorial Army or the regular and emergency



Staghounds served the same role in Italy that the Daimler armoured cars performed in armoured car regiments in North West Europe during the war. It remained in service for a few years after the war with the British Army. Occupation duties like patrolling road networks were much easier with armoured cars than with tanks. Trooper Taffy Evans of the 1st King's Dragoon Guards, with Staghound No. 116308 (*Fairway*) in Muquibila, Palestine 1946. (*Brian Simpson*)

reserves. These measures were necessary because the army by 1948 had too few junior officers to deal with National Service.⁴

At loggerheads with sudden growth of the citizen army was the tiny size of the regular army force available to train them in the late 1940s. With limited manpower in most regiments, taking on and training new conscripts at first caused grave difficulties. The increased training needs of the National Service conscripts were handled by the rationalization of the Royal Armoured Corps training establishment into three sites using the wartime format and training regiments. The main training bases were at Catterick, Carlisle and Barnard Castle (which trained armoured car crews exclusively). The biggest training areas for armoured regiments in the UK were dotted around Salisbury Plain, and the infantry school at Warminster was permanent home to a detached armoured squadron. Providing instructors to these establishments caused a regular drain on manpower for the RAC's regiments in the United Kingdom.

The second drain on the home based armoured regiments was the assignment of some regiments based in Britain to train the Territorial Army's RAC-affiliated regiments in 1947. National Service required fifty-four months of reserve service in the TA after full time regimental service in the army. The permanent staff for each of newly raised territorial regiments came from the associated regular RAC regiment. The withdrawal of troops from India and Palestine by the end of 1948 would have resulted in the wholesale disbandment of more RAC units had training needs not been so pressing. Most RAC units tasked with training had only been back in the UK for a short time, and all were below strength.⁵



A few Alectos were used overseas with armoured regiments in the Middle East and Italy after the war. The tarpaulin in this photo is to keep the gun breech dust-free. (Brian Simpson)

The Daimler Dingo Scout Car was retained in service after the war until the late 1950s. In postwar armoured regiments both the Dingo and the wartime Humber were used for liaison purposes; these examples belong to the Queen's Bays. In this 1947 photo taken in Egypt the vehicles are marked as belonging to the senior regiment in the 1st Armoured Division. (Brian Simpson)





A Cromwell Mk.VIII of the 3rd/4th County of London Yeomanry in the 1950s. The Territorial Army's RAC regiments numbered over thirty between 1947 and 1961, and in 1947–1948 the number of units requiring permanent staff from the regular Royal Armoured Corps regiments (themselves short of manpower) put severe strain on the corps. Eventually, the needs of the TA units were met by the influx of former conscripts. After 1961, the number of TA units was steadily reduced and the TA's armoured formations disappeared. The 3rd/4th CLY was part of the 56th (City of London) Armoured Division, TA. (*The Kent and Sharpshooters Yeomanry Museum*)

With the exception of the strategic reserve, these regiments were stationed on a mixture of established camps, or reoccupied decrepit wartime bases that had been vacated for two years. The regular RAC regiments assigned to training the part time soldiers did, by all accounts, an excellent job, but the price was high until the regular RAC regiments were up to their own manpower requirement. With detached squadrons spread around the country, RAC units training the TA fell below operational capability very quickly. The Queen's Bays, the 12th Lancers, the 14th/20th Hussars, the 8th Royal Tank Regiment and the 17th/21st Lancers all served as training units in 1948. The other repatriated armoured regiments dedicated to training the Territorial Army at various times soon included the 3rd Carabiniers, the 1st King's Dragoon Guards, the Life Guards, the 7th Hussars, the 8th Hussars, the 9th Lancers, the 2nd RTR and the 6th RTR. With the exception of the six regiments in BAOR, every regiment in the Royal Armoured Corps was well under strength. Poor equipment maintenance capabilities in the dispersed armoured squadrons quickly reduced vehicle availability, and inadequate accommodation in disused wartime camps added misery to boredom.⁶

The 1947 journal of the 3rd Carabiniers (who had just returned to England after ten years in India and who had taken up garrison at Bordon and Perham Down near Tidworth) mentioned their unfortunate conditions: