

Below: A RAM Kangaroo, loaded with troops, advancing into action, even the hull machine-gunner is sitting with his head out so they are in no danger – yet.



ONLY THE BRAVE

David Fletcher remains vexed by the turretless but surprisingly versatile Ram Kangaroo personnel carrier



Photographed in very chilly conditions, Canadian RAM Kangaroos looking rather overloaded as they wait to go into action.

This article was inspired, as are many, by an enquiry. I was asked where and who converted Ram Kangaroo personnel carriers from gun tanks? Well, the fact is, I didn't know – and since the enquiry came from my old friend Brian Baxter at the REME museum it was clearly pointless asking there. Having been through my library of books, I couldn't find the answer among those either. The only slight clue came from a Canadian publication on its Ram Kangaroo Regiment which said that all the redundant Canadian tanks were stored at a site at Dagenham in Essex, the huge Ford factory you might suppose, and those destined to become Kangaroos had their turrets removed before being shipped to France. There, it said, they would be converted into Kangaroos by CREME, a Canadian Brigade Workshop and maybe one of the REME Brigade Workshops attached to 79th Armoured Division. After all, they would be operating the British Kangaroos through the dedicated Kangaroo Regiment, 49th Royal Tank Regiment, which was to be part of the Division. It all sounded very plausible but we needed proof.

The next step, an obvious one you might think, was to ask in Canada, so I contacted my friend Roger Lucy. Roger had just published a book on the Ram so you'd think he ought to know, but he didn't. However, he did tell me that all Kangaroos destined for 1st Canadian Armoured Carrier Regiment were of the later type of Ram with a hull mounted bow machine gun, while those with the machine gun in a little sub-turret at the front were issued to the British Ram Kangaroo regiment 49 RTR. This may well have been so to begin with but later on Kangaroos can be seen with a mixture of types in one column, suggesting that when vehicles were withdrawn for repair or maintenance they could be replaced by either type. In mechanical terms it made no difference at all.

If the idea of driving around on the battlefield in a tank, without a turret and no more armament than a hull machine gun does not appeal to you may I suggest that you don't volunteer to command a Ram Kangaroo, because that is what you'll get.

BATTLING RAM

The Ram was a tank designed in Canada, based on the mechanics and running gear of the American M3 Medium tank but with a hull and turret designed along British lines. It was never used in action as a gun tank since before D-Day the Canadians elected to use the American Sherman, bringing

them in line with the Americans, British and other Allies who took part in the campaign in North West Europe. It seems a pity in a way since the most common version of the Ram mounted a six-pounder gun which, if supplied with Armour Piercing Discarding Sabot (APDS) ammunition, which was available from June 1944, would have made them very effective against such German tanks as the Tiger. Especially at ranges in excess of 1000 yards, which is more than the Sherman was capable of – although they could not match the Sherman firing a high explosive round. Mind you, the Ram had a more cramped turret which made a considerable difference.

LEAPING INTO ACTION

The first Kangaroos were not Rams at all but M7 Priest self-propelled guns with the weapons lifted out, to be completed as APCs. Instructions were issued for 72 to be ready by the evening of 5 August 1944 to take part in Lieutenant General

Guy Simmonds's Operation Totalize. It was a daunting task, especially since the instructions to do it were not issued until 31 July 1944 and the equipment not assembled until 2 August 1944. Two fields near Bayeux were appropriated for the site and parties of British and Canadian REME personnel assembled to do the work. Often it involved more than just converting the vehicles, sometimes engines had to be lifted out and worked on as well. The aperture at the front, where the 105mm howitzer used to stick out, had to be plated over and additional panels of armour added to the sides. However, bearing in mind that in due course the vehicles might have to be restored as SP guns this had to be done carefully. At first armour was acquired from wrecked tanks, put aside for the purpose, but when this ran out panels were cut from stranded landing craft, resulting in complaints from the Royal Navy. Ultimately they had to rely on mild steel plates, fitted over the inner and outer gaps of the opening with a filling of sand

Right: Canadian Kangaroos of 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment in 79th Armoured Division, amidst battered buildings looking rather tired and cluttered with kit. Below: More Canadian Kangaroos, drawn up behind a Universal Carrier with some of their passengers relaxing.



between them. Reports in the press at the time mentioned heavily armoured vehicles being used, but they weren't – the armour was just about bullet proof. Operation Totalize was not exactly the success it might have been, although it did eventually lead to the fall of Falaise. In contrast, Operation Astonia, the attack on Le Havre during which Priest Kangaroos were used again, was a great success.

THE FIRST RAM KANGAROOS

The first use of turretless Rams as Kangaroos seems to have been in October

1944, when 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment (later 1st Canadian Armoured Carrier Regiment) took part in operations. As we have already said, so far it has proved impossible to discover where the conversion was actually done and who did it but it seems reasonable to suppose that the turrets of tanks were lifted off in Britain and the hulls shipped over to be fitted out as Kangaroos. This involved repositioning the number 19 wireless set to the left of the hull machine gunner, and the boxing in of the drive shaft which ran through the centre of the fighting

compartment. There is no actual evidence of seats being fitted for the passengers, although a number of authors have claimed that there were. In most photographs the infantry appear to be standing up, but no doubt when there were bullets flying around the men squatted down on their packs so that their heads were below the level of the top of the hull. If proper seats were fitted then it appears to have been the exception rather than the rule.

Since it was never easy for men to get in and out over the top of the hull with full pack and rifle, it is also said that grab handles were welded on to the hull of the tank but these are not always visible in photographs, nor on surviving vehicles.

The organisation of a Kangaroo regiment was geared to the infantry. Each squadron could handle a battalion HQ and four rifle companies, one troop of Kangaroos could accommodate a company, a section of three Kangaroos could take an infantry platoon so each Kangaroo could transport eight fully equipped men. Or, to put it another way, the three squadrons of a Kangaroo regiment could carry an entire infantry brigade.

KANGAROO ACTION

It is difficult to find detailed accounts of any of the Kangaroo actions, let alone unusual and exciting ones. Mostly they advanced in columns, in the wake of the fighting tanks, and delivered infantry to their objectives. They took part in most of the actions against the Channel Ports conducted by the Canadian Army and increasingly against towns and cities in eastern Holland and Germany. Infantry travelling in them might not be comfortable but they were protected from enemy fire, from mines, barbed wire



Above: A turreted Kangaroo, as used by 49RTR, sitting on the start line ready to move into action. Below: Infantry climbing aboard Kangaroos in a convoy. They are not finding it easy.



Right: The Tank Museum's exhibit, restored from a wreck dragged off the ranges. The auxiliary turret is still in place but the Browning machine gun was not an easy fit.

and, of course, trudging for miles through mud and rain before even going into action.

Operation Blackcock, launched early in January 1945, serves as an example of their use. Conditions were dreadful; frost, rain and snow were all encountered which, when it thawed, rendered many of the roads unusable. Then there was fog and tough German opposition all conducted in bitterly cold conditions and at times very poor visibility. 79th Armoured Division was heavily involved with flails, bridgelaying AVREs and in particular flamethrowing Crocodiles. Kangaroos came from 1st Canadian Armoured Carrier Regiment but the few roads were soon rendered useless and it seemed every town and every village had to be fought for. Kangaroos proved just as vulnerable to anti-tank guns and mines as any other AFV, and on more than one occasion when Kangaroos could not proceed for one reason or another their infantry had to dismount and went in on foot.

General Ritchie, commanding 12 Corps, was very complimentary to 79th Armoured Division; after emphasising the terrible conditions he singled out the loss of Crocodiles while General Lyne, commanding 7th Armoured Division mentioned the Kangaroos in his post-action message.

Such was the anticipation of encountering extreme German resistance on the east bank of the Rhine that many Kangaroos were ferried across the river, even before the pontoon bridges were in place. In the event they were not required at once but, as



Heavily laden Kangaroos, perhaps in the supply role, in a snowy street. The Daimler Dingo passing the other way is rather overloaded. It seems to be carrying German prisoners and has what looks like a loudspeaker on the side.

the fighting continued through the final months of the war, they came to be used extensively, both for carrying the infantry in and taking the casualties out. Indeed

the Kangaroo.” Since the two Kangaroo Regiments, one British, one Canadian, both formed part of 79th Armoured Division (from December 1944) either could be used for an operation, sometimes even both together.

“Men squatted down on their packs so that their heads were below the level of the top of the hull.”

a Canadian officer claimed: “Since the substitution of the musket for the crossbow, there has been no development in infantry equipment comparable with the arrival of

Ram Kangaroos as an APC for some years after WW2 and we have an excellent but brief account of this written by an officer named Spiers who rejoined his regiment in

SURVIVING THE WAR

The British Army continued to use





This photograph of a turreted RAM Kangaroo in a tank park is almost certainly post-war.

England in 1948. By this time his regiment had become a Divisional Regiment RAC, which meant that it had to make some arrangements for infantry carrying. Each squadron included an Assault Troop of three or four Ram APCs, the rest of each squadron being equipped with Cromwell gun tanks.

Spiers was appointed an Assault Troop leader and he didn't have much very complimentary to say about the Ram Kangaroo. He says it

was supposed to carry 11 men, in acute discomfort, but that eight was as many as they could manage and that was a tight squeeze since among them they had to carry a PIAT, or a 2in mortar and a No.

38 manpack radio. But maybe he got that wrong since eight men was the normal load. No seats were provided although they attempted to create one by welding uprights to the prop shaft tunnel and fitting them with bedrolls on which the men could sit back to back. He describes dismounting as


“Leaping from that height could result in serious injury.”

“an uncomfortable and untidy” operation and those pictures you see of infantry jumping over the side and landing on the ground were only ever done for the camera. Leaping from that height could result in serious injury.

They had a drill for dismounting in action that involved parking sideways on to the enemy and having the infantry dismount on the safe side, although this made easy targets of the vehicles themselves. The alternative was to seek cover, maybe a nearby wood, dismount the

troops there and give covering fire as they attacked with the tanks' hull machine guns, although this

risked hitting your own men.

To sum up, Spiers regarded the Kangaroo as “not a very suitable vehicle for use as an APC,” but as we have seen, under the press of war it was regarded as very useful indeed. 

Below: Definitely a post-war photograph showing three RAM Kangaroos advancing over an army range; notice they are a mixture, two with the subsidiary turret and one with a ball mounting for the machine gun.

