



A SHORT HISTORY OF THE OPERATIONS OF  
**The Inns of Court Regiment**  
**(The Devil's Own)**

*From 1944 (D-Day) to 1945*



C Squadron Inns of Court Regiment  
Juno Beach Normandy 6th June 1944  
*in memory of Sergeant John Bright*

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**Inns of Court & City Yeomanry Association**

10 Stone Buildings

Lincoln's Inn

London WC2A 3TG

[www.iccy.org.uk](http://www.iccy.org.uk)



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This booklet describes briefly the operations of the Inns of Court Regiment ("ICR") from 6th June 1944 (D-Day) until 10th May 1945 when hostilities ended.

### **Role**

The ICR, whose history can be traced back to 1584, was at the outbreak of World War II an Officer Training unit but at the end of 1940 it was re-formed as an Armoured Car regiment to carry out reconnaissance or 'recce' duties which included:-

- i. spying out the land ahead of the main force to locate the enemy, opposing obstacles including minefields and ascertain their strength and future intentions;
- ii. discovering the state of the roads and bridges suitable for an advance;
- iii. carrying out specific patrol tasks;
- iv. reporting all information promptly, securely and accurately; and
- v. acting as a protective mobile screen on the flanks of the main force.

The role was highly hazardous often with detachments required to act independently, far away from any support, and one which required exceptional leadership at every level. Recce regiments were normally attached to either a Corps or a Division, serving as the eyes of the General.

<sup>1</sup> During a Royal review in 1803, HM King George III in 1803, who had a dislike for lawyers, on being told that the Regiment was composed of them, declared "They must be the Devil's Own" – the nickname was adopted.

## Organisation

In this role the Regiment was organised into five Squadrons: a headquarter (HQ) squadron, responsible for command and supplies, and four fighting Squadrons (designated A, B, C and D), known as "sabre squadrons"<sup>2</sup>. Each Squadron was sub-divided into eight or so Troops, the number being dependent on operational requirements. Each sabre squadron would have a 'Blitz Troop' of mounted infantry to carry out foot recces and flush out small groups of enemy. The Regiment had a total establishment<sup>3</sup> of 60 Officers and 731 Other Ranks.

## Vehicles

Small, fast armoured cars or scout cars were required to carry out the role and the establishment for vehicles was 76 Armoured Cars, 82 Scout Cars and 68 'soft' vehicles such as trucks to carry the considerable amount of spares, fuel and provisions required as well as staff cars and jeeps. The three main types of armoured car used by the sabre squadrons were:

**(a) Dingo**, made by Daimler. A compact and open-topped two-man scout car with four-wheel drive and a Bren machine gun for defence. Its armour was 30mm thick on the front and only 12mm on the sides; enough to stop machine gun fire but not much else! The plus points were speed (up to 55mph), unusual quietness and a low profile (only 1.5metres high).

**(b) Daimler Armoured Car**. This was a parallel development to the Dingo. It was bigger with a crew of 3, had slightly thicker armour and was armed with a 2 pounder gun and a BESA 7.92mm machine gun. Both had gear boxes that provided five speeds in each direction. They performed excellently and continued in service way beyond WWII.

**(c) White Half-Tracks**. These lightly armoured American vehicles had standard front wheels by which they steered with continuous tracks at the rear for reliable cross-country travel. Although not in establishment, they were used for the transport of personnel (the Blitz Troops) and supplies.

<sup>2</sup> A hangover from the days when troopers were mounted on horseback with sabres as their weapons.

<sup>3</sup> The 'establishment' was in practice a theoretical concept with numbers of both personal and vehicles differing.



Daimler 'Dingo' Scout Car



Daimler Armoured Car



## D-Day: 6th June 1944

Only one sabre squadron of ICR, C Squadron, was selected to take part in the initial D-Day assault. Their role was to act as protection to 85th Field Company of Royal Engineers ("RE") who were mounted in White Half-Tracks, loaded with a mass of demolition explosives. For this C Squadron was divided into 12 half troops, 8 of which included an RE half-track. The job of this small mobile force of around 200 men (143 ICR and the remainder RE) was to pass through the Allied defensive beach-head, which would be established half an hour earlier on the morning of D-Day, and penetrate deep into enemy territory in order to destroy thirteen bridges across the rivers Orne and Odon which ran northward, passing through Caen, to the English Channel. The furthest bridge was 30 miles from the coast. The purpose was to prevent German reinforcements arriving. At the time it was believed that the formidable German 21st Panzer Division were just to the east of the rivers.

This small force would land with the 3rd Canadian Division on Juno beach, about a mile west of Graye-sur-Mer, at H-Hour + 35 minutes and would be the first wheeled vehicles of the invasion on the beach. Graye-sur-Mer was liberated by the Canadians and became arguably the first village in France to be liberated. The Canadians used the village wash-house as a first aid dressing station.



*D-Day landings on Juno Beach*

Sadly things went wrong from the start. Shortly before the invasion, Field-Marshal Rommel, recently returned to command from staff duties, had inspected the beach defences and immediately ordered the erection of new obstacles. These severely damaged one of the two landing craft thereby disabling several vehicles. Others were blown up by mines despite earlier clearance operations. The Germans proved to be better prepared than anticipated and accordingly the force's progress was slow. A major disaster occurred on the second day when 2 half-troops were conferring at Jerusalem cross-roads, about five miles south of Bayeux.



*Jerusalem Crossroads - the carnage.*

They were mistakenly attacked by US Thunderbolt fighter bombers firing 2 inch rockets despite the vehicles displaying the yellow "we are friendly forces" recognition panels. With the RE's half-tracks filled with explosive charges, the outcome was the loss of the entire unit and the obliteration of the surrounding hamlet.

By the third day German reinforcements (including 21st Panzers) had arrived at the expanding bridgehead. Some of the force still pressed on but by the fourth day the enemy opposition had become too strong and all the survivors had to be withdrawn. Despite that failure and the loss of many men and vehicles, C Squadron and the REs had gone further and had covered a wider front than any other unit and, incidentally, captured a German Colonel.

For the rest of June C Squadron's members carried out communication and liaison duties for various higher HQs awaiting the remainder of the Regiment which disembarked at Juno beach on 1st July in preparation for the attack on Caen.

## Caen: 8th July onwards and Operation Goodwood

Caen was of the utmost strategic importance for both sides, standing in the way of the intended British advance south to Falaise. The original plan had been to capture the city during the initial invasion but this had been thwarted by the unexpectedly strong defences. Under command of 3rd Canadian Division, ICR's armoured cars moved forward to Caen on 8th July to provide covering fire for the infantry after Allied bombers had shattered the defences. ICR vehicles were the first troops to enter Caen on the 9th July.

Following this success, ICR took part in Operation Goodwood, the code name for the breakout on 18th July from Caen across the Orne for a massive attack on Bourguebus Ridge and Cagny to the south. Unusually the attack was led by armour and not by infantry. Over 4,500 Allied aircraft took part on the first day.



*Caen - after liberation.*

After intense fighting, the enemy was eventually cleared by the 21st July. During one encounter Lt Maurice Russell of D Squadron was forced to make a huge detour through enemy lines, collecting much useful information for which he was awarded the Military Cross (MC). ICR was awarded two battle honours: for its exploits at Caen and at Cagny.

## Caumont to Aigle: 22nd July to 26th August

On 22nd July ICR skirted round the north of Caen, west to Anguerny and on to Cully and thence south west to Caumont on the extreme right flank of the British Second Army which it was supporting in Operation Bluecoat which was a further attempt to break through the German line by securing the crossroads at Vire and the high ground of Mont Pinçon. This took them south to Cathéoles for which another battle honour was awarded. During this period Lt Jack Howdle was awarded a Military Cross (MC) for securing valuable information under most hazardous conditions.

ICR then headed east towards Argentan to attack the German troops caught in the "Falaise pocket" during which fierce fighting took place and MCs were awarded to Lieutenants HC Sim, Howard Ashby and DB Archer. Our troops also received another unpleasant visit from the Thunderbolts of the USAAF!

Argentan was cleared by 21st August and the Division was ordered east. On the following day Lt Howdle was ordered to recce as far as L'Aigle. On the way his Troop shot past a German Tiger tank which had no time to open fire. Just outside the village, his Troop's path was blocked by a blown bridge with no way round. With the Tiger tank undoubtedly approaching, a real crisis began. Thankfully, a young lad, Fernand Lepinay, appeared and led the Troop safely to the town where they were credited with its liberation. In 1984, Lt Howdle was honoured with a reception there on the 40th anniversary of the liberation.

## L'Aigle to Amiens: 26th to 31st August

ICR pushed on eastwards to Vernon crossing the Seine on the 28th August and, on the following day, continued north-eastwards and 3 days later, after an exhausting forced march overnight, captured Amiens together with the main bridge across the Somme. Patrols carried out from Amiens identified a number of V1 flying bomb sites.



*Daimler Dingo followed by Armoured Cars*

## Amiens to Antwerp: 1st to 4th September

On 1st September the Division continued their advance with C Squadron patrolling ahead of the main force. Arras was reached that night and the following day they arrived at Lens, a total distance of 80 miles. New orders came through requiring the Division to make for Antwerp, 90 miles to the north east, with all speed. The very next morning 9 Troop of D Squadron, ICR crossed the Belgian frontier, the first troops to enter Belgium liberating the small town of Templeuve. A war memorial records that event as does another at Hertain, the latter unveiled by Queen Elizabeth of Belgium in 1949.



On 4th September A Squadron found an intact bridge over the river Rupel and the way to Antwerp was assured. The city was secured later that day. British troops captured 6,000 Germans who, for lack of better secure accommodation, were housed in the Zoo, leading to a formal complaint by the German authorities! The Regiment had covered 340 miles through enemy territory in just six days only one of which had been free from combat.

### **Antwerp to Holland: 5th September to mid-March 1945**

From Antwerp the Regiment was ordered to locate a crossing for the Albert Canal. C Squadron moved south to Tongeren then back to Beeringen where an intact bridge had been secured by the Guards Armoured Division. B Squadron was first to cross and the first unit to break out of the bridgehead doing so on the 10th September but progress was extremely slow with both A and B Squadrons suffering substantial losses. Eventually Hechtel was taken and the Second British Army reached the Meuse-Escaut Canal. There they paused to await the start of Operation Market Garden - the attempt by parachute forces and the Second Army to capture the bridges over the canals and the Maas, Vaal and Lower Rhine rivers<sup>4</sup>. The ambitious plan was only partially successful in that all but the Arnhem bridges were captured but that failure stalled the operation during which time extensive patrolling was carried out by all Squadrons. On 21st September A Squadron captured two intact bridges north of Geltrop.



ICR on patrol

Patrolling now centred on the lower parts of Holland and assistance was provided to 11th Armoured Division in clearing a pocket of particularly stubborn Germans from the Maas area. The ICR's Armoured Cars had proved themselves to be so valuable that either Squadrons or the entire Regiment were frequently in demand by formations.

From early December ICR was stationed on the west Bank of the Maas working with two Dutch Patriot Companies in anticipation of a German counter-attack across the river. The weather was appalling and with continuous patrolling in boggy conditions against a determined enemy, life became deeply unpleasant.

### **Crossing the Rhine: 16th to 29th March 1945**

On 16th March ICR were moved to Goch, some 30 miles south of Arnhem, and employed on controlling traffic in all the marshalling areas to ensure the smooth passage of the Second British Army across the Rhine into their forming up positions. The assault on the German bridgehead commenced on the night of 23rd March, allowing ICR to be released from its traffic duties and to cross the Rhine to protect the left flank of 6th Airborne Division. By the 29th March 11th Armoured Division had arrived from Belgium and ICR was once more attached to it. The advance across Germany began.

### **Germany: 29th March to 9th April 1945**

During the advance ICR formed the vanguard<sup>5</sup>, patrolling ahead of the main force to receive possible lines of advance. There were few good roads and even fewer running in the right direction. Progress was further hindered by pockets of fanatical enemy, desperately fighting despite the odds against them. On the 31st March D Squadron accepted the surrender of Neuenkirchen. Later that day the river Ems was crossed with little trouble but all bridges across the Dortmund-Ems Canal had been blown and the advance was delayed until 2nd April whilst a Bailey bridge was built.

Three days later both the Osnabruck Canal and Ems-Weser Canal had been crossed and the force moved toward the river Weser. By this time the ICR were deployed across a front of 50 miles and, being ahead or to the flank of the main body, were almost constantly engaged in skirmishes.

<sup>4</sup> The operation was dramatised in the film 'A Bridge Too Far.'

<sup>5</sup> The foremost part of an advancing army and the Regimental magazine is eponymously entitled.

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Between the 7th and 10th April, in separate incidents, both A and B Squadron captured trains loaded with V1 and V2 rockets and located a number of launch sites, ammunition dumps and explosive factories.

### **Crossing the Weser, Belsen Camp and the surrender: 9th April to 10th May 1945**

The ICR crossed the Weser on the 9th April. 3 days later two German emissaries arrived under a flag of truce at D Squadron's position. Their mission was to negotiate terms for the handover of Belsen Concentration Camp and they were led to Division HQ. Their concern was that the camp's 60,000 prisoners might escape, risking the spread of typhus and turning the area into a battlefield. The proposal to create a large exclusion zone was unacceptable. In the end a local compromise was made. C Squadron committed their water cart for the camp survivors. The crew wheeling it into the camp twice a day after refilling it had, on each occasion, to be de-loused and their clothing burnt.

After days of active patrolling, involving constant contact with the enemy, on 18th April, the advance was continued taking them through Luneburg. A Squadron's scout cars were the first troops to enter the town. Later B Squadron forced the surrender of Oldendorf and Amelinghausen. Patrolling continued as 11th Armoured Division forced a crossing over the Elbe and crossed the Hamburg-Lubeck autobahn. Taking advantage of excellent German road building, they sped along and captured Lubeck on the 2nd May.

POW camps were liberated and numerous prisoners taken. The Division might have moved all the way up Schleswig-Holstein to the Danish frontier but peace negotiations precluded any further advance. On 5th May Field-Marshal Montgomery accepted the unconditional surrender of all German forces facing the Allies in the west. ICR were by then already north of the neutral zone. They stayed put until the official ending of the war in Europe on 8th May when they moved to the Kiel Canal to prevent German troops moving south. On the 10th May they moved to their designated area of occupation, Kreis Sudtondern near the Danish frontier.



*ICR Daimler Armoured Car on patrol near Wolfenbuttel*

In approximately 11 months ICR had motored 1,200 miles from the beaches of Normandy. Numerous bravery awards were made including 2 DSOs, 18 MCs, 6 MMs, 1 MBE, 27 Mentions in Dispatches, 20 C-in-C's Certificate for Gallantry and 7 for Good Service as well as 2 French and 1 Belgian Croix de Guerre and 1 Knight of the Order of Orange Nassau. Sixty four members died and many more were wounded.

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Edgebury Press, [edgebury@uk2.net](mailto:edgebury@uk2.net)



