

Canada's Secret Armoured Train

One of Canada's military secrets from World War II was the armoured train that operated as part of the west coast defences. The *No. 1 Armoured Train* ran the stretch between the port of Prince Rupert and inland city of Terrace BC. The train covered the 150 kilometres of rail along the Skeena River, day and night, without any fixed schedule.

The initiative was started in March of 1942 when officials from the Department of National Defence and the CN Railway met to discuss the need for a specially constructed armoured train, built exclusively to patrol the Skeena River and protect the vital rail link to the coast. Its mission was to act as a rapid striking force to counter any sudden Japanese assault on Prince Rupert.

In the spring of 1942, blueprints from Ottawa and materials from Halifax were shipped to manufacturing shops at Transcona, Manitoba, and construction began. Production proceeded on three shifts a day, including Sundays and holidays, to cover the rail cars in thick and heavy armour plate eight to 16 mm thick.

While work progressed, there were construction challenges from a lack of supplies and sudden design changes. At the same time, the Japanese captured Kiska and Attu in the Aleutian Islands and an attack on Prince Rupert was thought to be imminent. All this added to the project's urgency. Successfully completed, the train was ready for operations in late June of 1942.

The standard configuration for the train was eight cars: two-armed gondola cars followed by a coach for the soldiers, armed with mortars, guns and anti-tank rifles, the locomotive in the centre, then a dining car and two more armed gondola cars bringing up the rear. Two of the armed gondolas carried a 75mm gun and the other two each carried a pair of 40 mm Bofors guns for air defence and combat support.

The assigned military crew consisted of more than 200 officers and men from "*A*" Company, *The Winnipeg Grenadiers*. Because of the weight of armour, it was slow-moving operation, taking about 12 hours to make the one-way trip between Terrace and Prince Rupert. In an effort to provide a rest on a long shift, and to train the troops, the route was shortened. It then patrolled between Tye (at the mouth of the Skeena River and most likely place for a landing) and Terrace, a trip of approximately 75 kilometres.

In September of 1942 the armoured train was sent to Vancouver for upgrades and returned for operations in November. However, by January of 1943 the Japanese threat to the west coast had diminished and the train then ran only once a week. In late 1943 it was decided that the train was no longer needed. It was decommissioned in 1944.

During its service the Armoured Train and its crew never had to confront an enemy, but it served a useful purpose of providing a credible defence against an attack on the northwest coast.

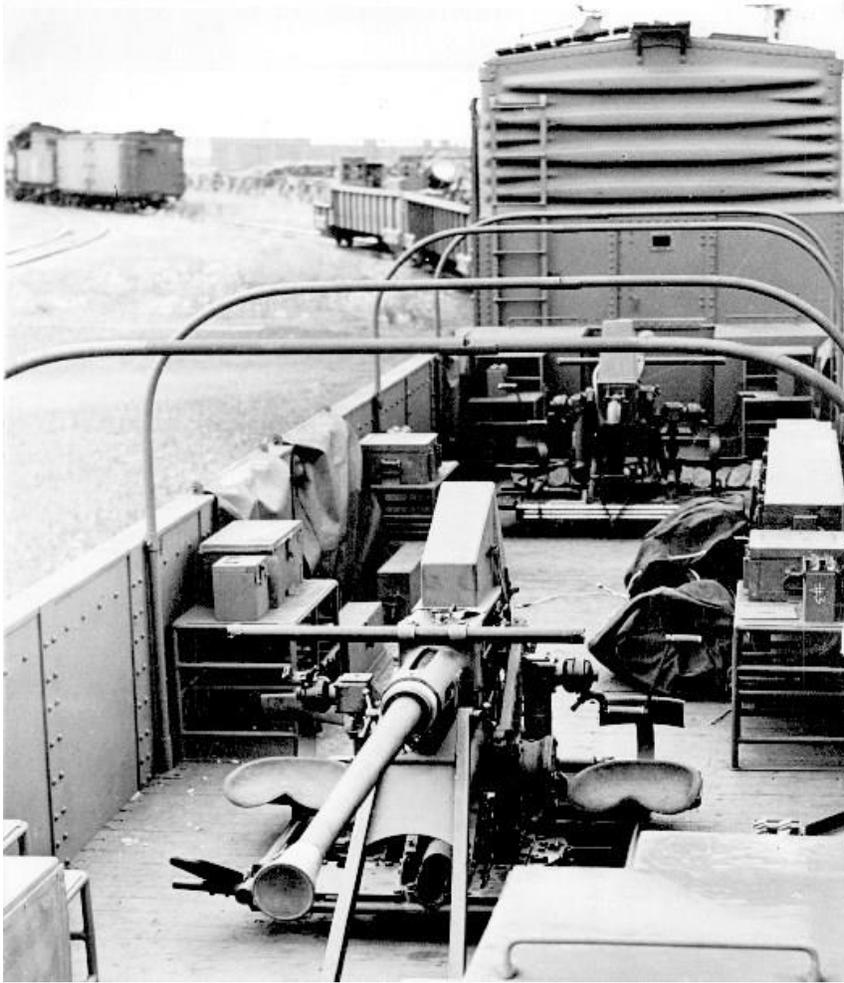


Figure 1 Two 40 mm Bofors guns. These were primarily for air defence but could be used in ground battle as well as against lightly armoured vehicles and troop

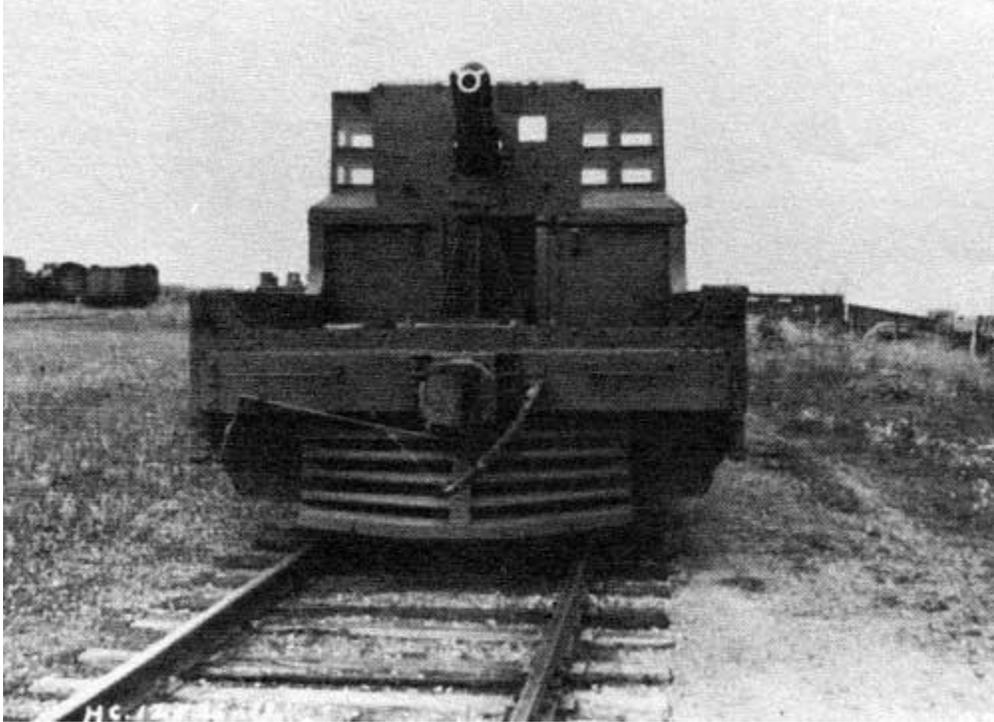


Figure 2 A 75 mm gun mounted on a gondola car. There was one such gun at each end of the train.

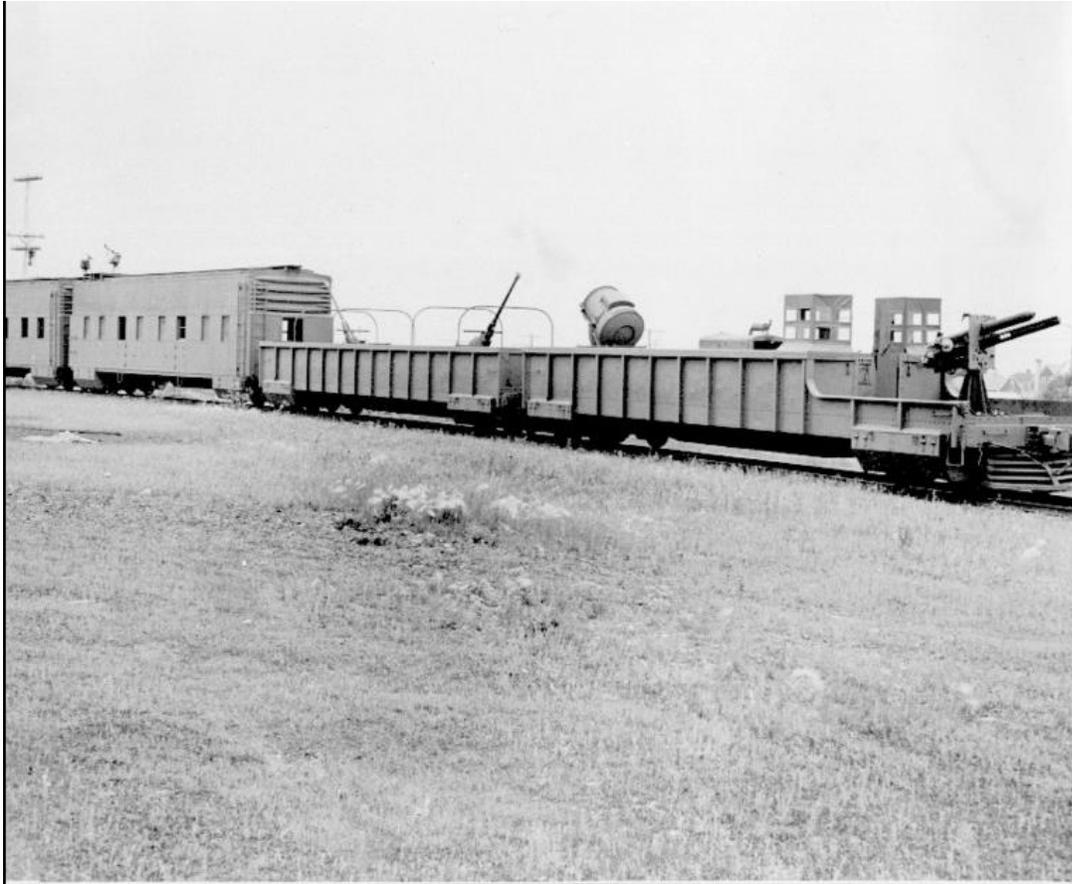


Figure 3 One half of the Armoured Train with cars in the correct order from right to left. The other half of the train was similarly arranged from left to right, with the engine in the middle. The searchlight is to the left of the main gun.

