

Gallantry with Porterforce – 31 October and 1 November 1944

Background

By late October 1944, the 1st Canadian Corps had been in constant action since the Gothic Line Battle in the last week of August (Operation OLIVE). The Savio River had been crossed but little success had been found moving forward to Ravenna over the flooded Po Valley plain. This lull in the campaign, combined with the utter fatigue of the Corps led to a decision to move them into the 8th Army reserve; all that is except a handful of Canadian units assigned to a hastily organised battle group dubbed Porterforce based around the British Army's 27th Lancers led by Lt-Col Porter. Among these units was 12th Field Company, RCE.



1 MAJOR-GENERAL CHRIS VOKES (LEFT) MEETS WITH FIELD MARSHAL SIR HAROLD ALEXANDER

Colonel Porter's force of over 2000 all ranks consisting of armour, infantry, artillery and engineers, was tasked with the capture of the city of Ravenna. Operations started on 28 October over a line of advance across flooded plains, canals and rivers, mines and demolitions.



2 A CANADIAN VEHICLE CROSSES ITALY'S MONTONE RIVER, LATE 1944.

Role of the RCE

The 12th Field Company's tour with Porterforce was a busy one. It swept miles of road south of the Ronco and built, besides numerous bridges under 80 feet, a 120-foot triple-single class 30 bridge over the Bevano River, on the long straight road running due north from Cesena to Ravenna. The maintenance of this road was its prime responsibility. The Company's casualties totalled six during the period, with one man killed while working on a Riegelmine.1 Lieutenant F. W. Philpot, leading a platoon in support of 'C Squadron of the 27th Lancers, earned the Military Cross for a rapid bridging job under heavy mortar fire. The bridge enabled the Lancers to catch and to inflict heavy casualties among a body of retiring enemy. Sergeant A. E. Critchley (shortly afterwards wounded) won the Military Medal under similar circumstances, except that the obstacle he overcame was a stretch of mines. On 7th November the 264th Field Company, R.E., relieved the 12th Field Company. Three days later one of its platoons, working well up, came under machine-gun fire. It lost three killed (including the platoon officer) and had seven wounded.

Source: **History of the Royal Canadian Engineers, Volume II:**

Citations

On 31 October 1944, Sergeant Critchley, Platoon Sergeant of No.1 Platoon was in charge of a party supporting "B" Squadron, 27th Lancers in their advance. A troop of armoured cars was stopped in San Stefano (M.553269) due to mines in the lateral road leading to the crossroads at M.574268. Sergeant Critchley with a mine clearing party proceeded to sweep and clear mines from the road to enable the cars to advance. During the entire operation, the party was under enemy observation and under heavy mortar fire. Under the influence of Sergeant Critchley's calm, cool and daring leadership the party cleared mined along the entire stretch of road, a distance of nearly 2,000 yards. By reason of this Non-Commissioned Officer's courageous leadership and devotion to duty, the armoured cars were enabled to advance up the lateral road to the road junction and thence north a further distance of 1,500 yards and re-engage the enemy. This Non-Commissioned Officer was consequently wounded whilst engaged on a similar operation.

PHILPOT, Frederick Weight, Lieutenant - Military Cross - Engineers (12 Canadian Field Company)

On 1 November 1944 the advance of "C" Squadron, 27th Lancers was held up by a blown bridge across the Foccato Grande Detto Ghiatia at Map Reference 522265. Number 1 Platoon under command Lieutenant Philpot was in support of this squadron. A bridge was found to be necessary to enable the armoured cars to proceed and although under shell fire in the area, Lieutenant Philpot decided to bridge immediately. With his reconnaissance party, he proceeded to the bridge site at 1130 hours and under fire made a reconnaissance of the gap. A 50-foot bridge was required and a 50-foot single Bailey was constructed by 1500 hours, the whole operation being done under heavy mortar fire. By reason of Lieutenant Philpot's decision to bridge immediately, even though under enemy fire, and by his ability in organising and conducting the operation so efficiently, two Troops [of] 27th Lancers were enabled to advance to contact the enemy. Owing to the speed with which this bridge was built and the ensuing rapid advance of the 27th Lancers the enemy were caught unawares and suffered severe casualties.
