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An Introduction to The Battle for the Melfa River

Lieutenant-General W.A. Milroy, DSO, CD

The battle for the Melfa River on 24 May 1944 started with Lieutenant-Colonel Vokes' VOKESFORCE, based on the British Columbia Dragoons, advancing through the breakthrough of the Hitler Line at about 0800 hours. This force established a firm base, codeword KUMMEL, about 2,000 yards beyond the 3rd Infantry Brigade salient. STRATHFORCE, (also known as "Griffin Force,") based on Lieutenant-Colonel Griffin's Lord Strathcona's Horse (RC), moved through KUMMEL at about 1330 hours. Its objective was to seize a crossing of the Melfa River.

The direct route from KUMMEL to a ford on the Melfa, which was the obvious place to cross, was reasonably open and rolling country — what is generally called "good tank going." Fortunately Colonel Griffin decided to avoid this route and took one 1,000 yards to the right, or northeast. This decision was made despite the fact that the chosen route had rough going, visibility limited by brush, olive orchards and woods, and a much more difficult crossing of the river.

The result was that STRATHFORCE was able to advance at speed, encountering little enemy opposition on the way. "A" Squadron followed the three vehicle recce troop, commanded by Lieutenant E.J. Perkins, down the centre line. "C" Squadron followed on the left, and "B" Squadron, the squadron I was commanding, was on the right with the railway station as its objective.

The country was so close in the "B" Squadron sector that we could not employ conventional tactics. We therefore closed up into a tight formation and just smashed our way through until we got to the edge of the open area around the station. "A" and "C" Squadrons covered the four miles to the river in remarkably short time. Once there they found themselves in the rear of the surprised defenders, who were positioned to cover the "good tank going" approach and the ford. To quote G.W.L. Nicholson's *The Canadians in Italy*,

... the action developed into a series of bitter duels between individual Shermans and Panthers. By half-past four the German forces had been destroyed or driven across the river, but the enemy had moved up reinforcing armour and guns to the far bank, and a heavy fire fight raged back and forth across the river until dark. (p. 430)

"B" Squadron, meanwhile, encountered nothing at the railway station but did find some action towards Highway 6 on its right.

The battle cost the Strathcona's 17 tanks for the destruction of five German tanks, eight self-propelled guns and various other equipment. Two officers and 18 other ranks were killed; seven officers, including the second-in-command and the "A" and "C" Squadron commanders, and nine other ranks, were wounded.

It was against this background that Lieutenant Perkins was getting across the river and establishing a bridgehead as he describes in the following report. This bridgehead, reinforced by Major Jack Mahony's "A" Company of the Westminsters, which was part of STRATHFORCE, was held despite fierce attacks by the Germans. The mission of STRATHFORCE was accomplished thanks, in part, to "poor tank going."

For their contributions to this action, Major Mahony received the Victoria Cross, Lieutenant-Colonel P.A. Griffin was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, and Lieutenant Perkins was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Perkins' Troop Sergeant, C.N. Macey, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal while another soldier in his unit, Trooper Jacob Funk, won the Military Medal for his actions at the Melfa River.



Lieutenant-Colonel P.G. "Paddy" Griffin, Commanding Officer, Lord Strathcona's Horse (RC) and Captain W.A. Milroy, Commander, "B" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse (RC), in England, 1943

(Courtesy of W.A. Milroy)