

Crossing the Melfa River

Lieutenant Edward J. Perkins, DSO

The recon troop of an armoured regiment consists of eleven light American General Stuart or "Honey" tanks. From these the turrets have been removed and instead a .50 Browning machine gun is mounted. The vehicle carries a crew of five and its fire power besides the .50 includes a .30 Browning, a Bren gun, a PIAT and four Tommies. We also carry prepared charges and grenades. In small arms weapons, our fire power per man is as large as any force in the army. Our job is close recon both of the ground and of the enemy which we are prepared to do either from our vehicles or on foot.

For the Melfa crossing, six of my tanks were taken for use by engineers who were travelling with us and my troop consisted of only five tanks. As a matter of fact, my own tank had a mechanical failure soon after we crossed the start line and I had to switch to my sergeant's tank. At no time during the operation did the troop consist of more than four tanks carrying in all twenty men.

The plan of the operation was that a force commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Vokes of the British Columbia Dragoons (BCD) and including the Irish Regiment of Canada, was to push through the gap in the Adolf Hitler Line which had been made by 1st Canadian Division. They were to advance about 8000 yards and then form a strong point or "firm base." My regiment was to go through this strong point and advance the remaining 4000 yards to the Melfa. We were then to seize a crossing and to hold it while other troops passed over and continued the advance. My job was to lead the regiment during the advance to get to the river as quickly as possible, find a crossing and get over. The Commanding Officer (CO) would

then push over "A" Company of the motor battalion who were under his command, and if possible, get a tank squadron over, although whether this last would be possible, was not certain.

The Vokes force pushed over the start line at 0600 hours. At 0800 hours, the CO sent me forward to liaise with them and to find out what was happening. I found that while the preceding units were not encountering great opposition from the enemy, they were having considerable difficulty in getting their tanks forward over many obstacles and the rate of advance was consequently slow. I spent most of the morning reporting progress to my CO who was impatiently waiting in the assembly area two or three thousand yards back.

At about 1130 hours, we got orders to move forward. Progress was still very slow both because of the many defiles and the congestion on the road. We started to pass through the BCD tanks, many of which were firing, but at what I could not see. Eventually at about 1340 hours, we were clear of them and on our own.

I headed straight up the centre line. The country was close and visibility limited. It was not very easy to map-read, but I had a good set of air photographs and never had any trouble in keeping track of my position. The first enemy I saw was about a thousand yards from the BCD. A half-track was parked behind a house with its crew around it. My troop opened fire on the crew who tried to run for it. Five were hit and two apparently managed to get away. About 2000 yards further on, a Panther tank suddenly came across my right front travelling very quickly at a range of about 300



yards. The crew commander was standing in the turret with most of his chest exposed. I immediately opened up on him with my .50 Browning and had the satisfaction of seeing him slump forward out of his cupola. The Panther made no effort to retaliate and I kept going forward as fast as I could. A little further on I saw two more tanks to the left. I heard "A" Squadron getting ready for them over the wireless and so I kept going. Apparently they did not see me for they did not fire. As we came close to the river bank, I saw a house in which there was movement. We immediately opened up on it. A few seconds later, a white flag appeared at the end of the windows to be followed when our fire ceased by eight Germans with their hands up. I could not be bothered by prisoners, so I waited a few seconds until a carrier from a scout platoon of the motor battalion which was working with "A" Squadron came up. I turned the prisoners over to the carrier's crew then pushed on to the river bank. We reached it at about 1500 hours.

When we were planning the operation, the CO and I studied the ground by means of air photographs. We found at least two possible crossings, and of these, we deliberately chose the most difficult for the initial crossing, since it was far less likely to be defended. The plan was that "C" Squadron on the left would later try the other crossing, but before this part of the plot could be put into effect, they became involved in a major tank battle. It turned out that the best crossing was effectively covered by many anti-tank weapons, but the one we had chosen was virtually undefended.

By this time, one of my tanks had become lost in the difficult country and there were only three left. I parked them under cover and dismounted with Sergeant Macey to carry out a recce of the crossing. We posted three men with Bren guns to cover us and began our search. Towards the left, the bank was impassable, but about 75 yards to the right, there was a sort of ledge leading down into the river bed. This was very steep and difficult, but

Lieutenant E.J. Perkins
(LdSH(RC) Museum)

still passable to tanks. All along the river bank, were well prepared enemy positions which we searched as we went along. The enemy had obviously vacated them in great haste as there was kit equipment lying about in profusion. Sergeant Macey and I climbed down into the stream-bed and up the far bank. As we did so, we came under Spandau fire from the right and one of the Bren gunners was shot in the shoulder. This was the only casualty of the whole operation. Sergeant Macey and I got across safely and into cover on the far side. At this point, we came under co-ax fire from an "A" Squadron tank as "A" Squadron had now come up to the river bank to support us.

The track on the far side was even more difficult than that on the near side. I decided, however, that it could be made passable, though hard work would be necessary. I remained on the far bank to guide the tanks up it while Sergeant Macey returned to guide them down the near bank. The crossing was successfully completed one tank at a time, but getting up the far bank required a certain amount of field engineering. I sent two men with Bren guns up on the top of the bank to cover us while the remaining thirteen went to work. There was an obstructing bank upon which we exploded three prepared charges. It was also necessary to widen the crack in one place, and to do this we built a sort of retaining wall using several tree trunks and then filled up the gap with dirt. We did some furious work with pick and shovel, which if not the soldier's favourite weapons, are among his most useful. In retrospect I think this was the most ticklish part of the whole business. While we were not actually under fire, we knew that the enemy must have an idea of what we were up to and might be expected to do something at any time. Everything depended on speed — in an amazingly short time the job was finished.

We got the tanks up the track and into a hull down position below the bank. About a hundred yards to my left was a house showing signs of enemy occupation. I decided that our next task must be to capture it. Myself, Sergeant Macey and three men carrying two tommyes and a Bren gun, crept along under cover of the bank and approached the house from its back door. As I rushed through the court-yard and

into the house, I saw eight paratroopers staring through the window and loopholes in the direction of the other crossing, the one which we had decided not to use. I shouted to "drop-it," and they turned around in considerable astonishment. They were big, well-built men armed to the teeth and for a moment, I didn't know what was going to happen. My trigger finger itched, but I did not open fire. Suddenly, one dropped his rifle to be followed instantly by all the others and their hands rose in sullen astonishment. There was one officer, one NCO and six other ranks. A search of the house revealed no more. Obviously they had expected us to attack the main crossing and were unprepared for this unexpected development.

I immediately organized the position for defence. The three tanks were brought into a hull-down position on the right of the house and we dismounted some of the smaller weapons for all-round defence. I sent one man back with the prisoners and also Sergeant Macey to guide "A" Squadron across. The remaining thirteen of us were painfully few for the task at hand. All of this had taken about 30 minutes from the time we first reached the river bank.

The enemy had seen us taking the prisoners out and was now turning his attention to us. A sniper in a tree about 150 yards away opened up, and although he was an astonishingly poor shot, he was nevertheless very annoying. I fired two shots at him from a PIAT and the second one exploded in the branches. His rifle fell to the ground and the sniper slumped across a branch like a bag of grain.

So far, the operation was going quite successfully. I had seized the bridgehead and could now expect to be reinforced by "A" Company of the Westminster Regiment followed closely by the remainder of the battalion. Unfortunately the route taken by the tracked vehicles proved impractical for the White Scout Cars of the motor companies. The engineers did not get a route forward as quickly as had been expected, and it was necessary for the motor company to feel its way forward over difficult going in the face of artillery and small arms fire. It was apparent that I would have to hold on by myself for some considerable time.

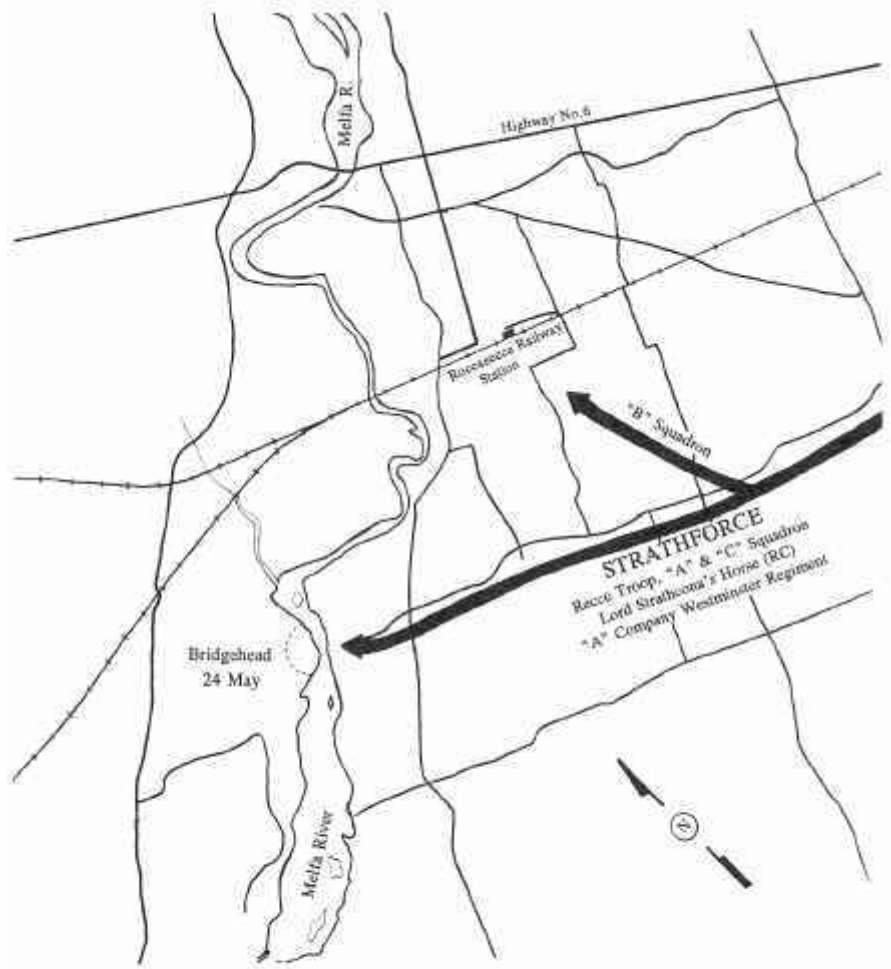
The original idea had been to get "A" Squadron across as quickly as possible. About this time, however, two Panthers and a Self-Propelled (SP) 88 made their appearance to my left, that is the east, the closest being about 400 yards away. They began a slow rate of fire with high explosive (HE) on the house I was occupying. Fortunately none of these did any damage, but the position was definitely becoming very warm. The tanks and SP turned the bulk of their attention to "A" Squadron on the far bank and started to cause damage in the squadron headquarters and the two rear troops. It was apparent that "A" Squadron was suffering heavily and it was increasingly doubtful whether they could cross the river. I could see from "A" Squadron's reply to the fire that they had not located the source of the trouble, particularly the SP 88 which was causing particular damage. I therefore turned over command to Corporal McLean and recrossed the river with the object of pointing out the target to "A" Squadron. I stood on the back of first Captain Whittle's, and later Lieutenant MacKinnon's tanks, while they tried to knock out the target. Either because they were unable to identify the target or because the range was too long, they were unsuccessful. I then returned across the river.

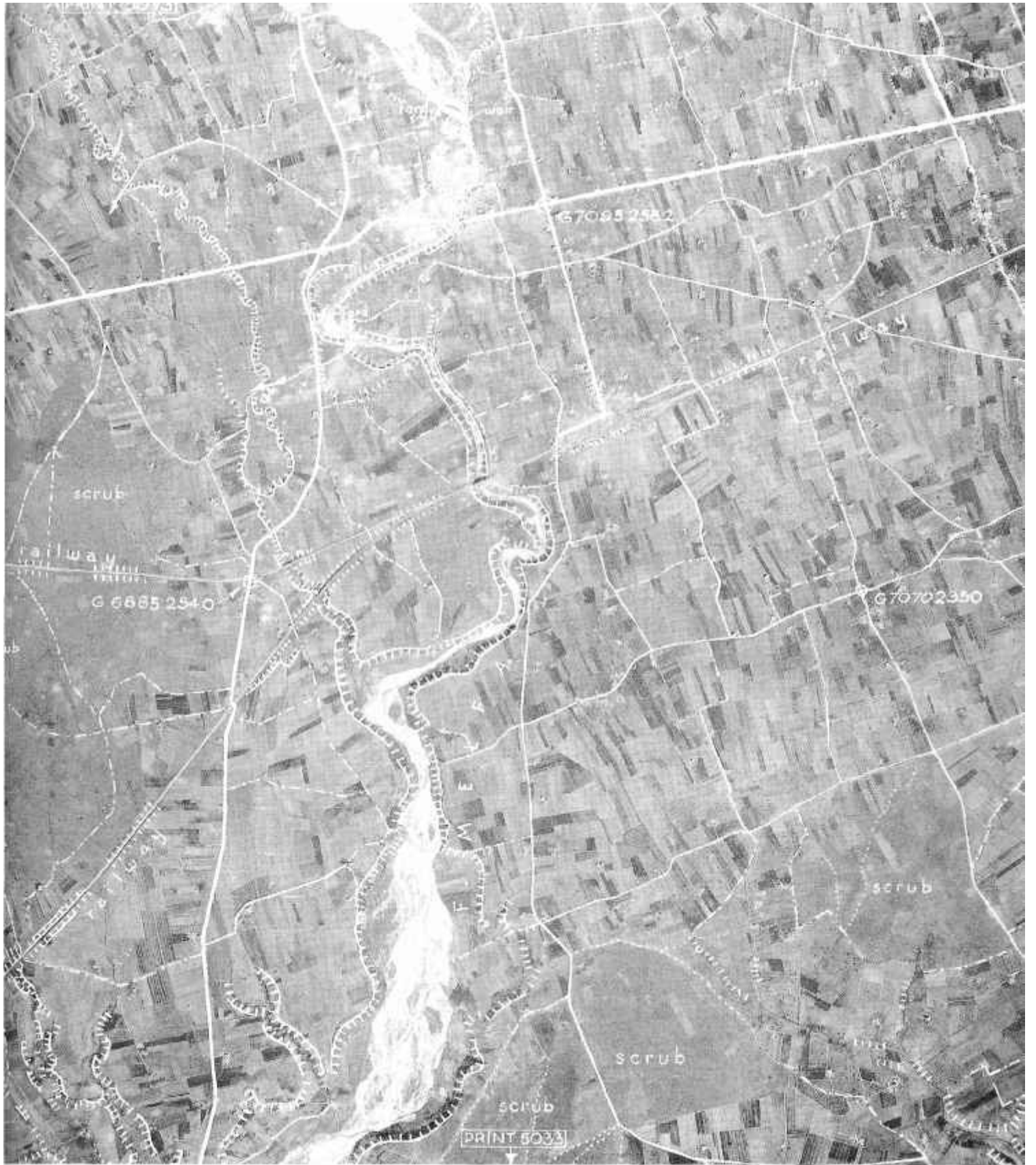
It was about this time Sergeant Macey returned. He also realized that "A" Squadron would be unable to cross, but he had found my tank which Sergeant Lofvendah had managed to repair and brought it over the river. I did not bring it up the bank, but placed it some distance below the crest as a rallying point in case we were forced out of our position. The situation was now becoming very difficult.

There was a house on our left about 150 or 200 yards away. Spandau fire came from the house at intervals and about twenty infantry were observed in the vicinity. I felt certain the enemy was concentrating in order to wipe out our small bridgehead and kept up a heavy fire from small arms, particularly the .50s with the objective of confusing him as to our strength. We had the satisfaction of causing him at least a few casualties, including two hits by .50s. I would have liked to make use of the PIAT, but decided to conserve ammunition in case of an

Right: Air Photo of Melfa River, 19 March 1944, (altitude 25,000'). (LCMSDS Air Photo Collection)

The Melfa River Crossing





attack by the enemy tanks. These were moving about considerably and from time-to-time were turning their attention on us. Nearly all of their shots were high and the shells were exploding about 50 yards behind us, and by great good fortune caused no casualties. There was no doubt that if the enemy chose to employ his tanks and infantry for the purpose, he could have driven us out of the bridgehead. The urgent need was for infantry with which we could expand the bridgehead, get tanks across and so continue the advance. I reported all of this to the CO who could do very little for me except request that the infantry brigade be pushed forward as quickly as possible. This was about 1600 hours. The tanks were fighting hard on the near bank and were unable to give me much support. The CO gave me permission to recross the river if necessary. However, as we had so far succeeded in bluffing the enemy as to our strength, I decided to hold on — but the decision was not an easy one.

At about 1700 hours, "A" Company of the Westminster Regiment under Major Mahony started to arrive, first one platoon and then the remainder of the company. The good luck which we had unfortunately did not extend to them and they had several casualties including one man killed within two minutes of reaching the position. Major Mahony quickly organized an attack on the house to my left. This was captured, together with twenty prisoners, at the cost of some casualties. The SP 88 to my left was still doing damage and Trooper Funk volunteered to take it out with a PIAT covered by two Bren gunners of the Westminster Regiment. He crept along the bank of the river until he was about 150 yards from the SP at which time he fired one round. This exploded prematurely owing to overhanging foliage. Trooper Funk then crept forward to a spot from which he could get a better shot. At a range of about 100 yards, his next shot was higher and another low, but the final shot hit the suspension following which the crew bailed out. One was shot with the Bren gun and the remainder were eventually captured. After this, the two Panthers pulled back to a range of about 800 yards. Shortly after this, a patrol which had been pushed out to the right flank, reported that the enemy was massing on this flank, which hitherto had been quiet, in preparation for an attack.



Trooper Jacob Funk
(LdSH(RC) Museum)

Major Mahony asked me if I could push my tanks out on the right flank so as to give him support. I asked if any tanks had been seen on the right and was told there was one and possibly more. I pointed out that the fire power of a cut-down Stuart against a Panther was inconsiderable and that to expose them to fire from the tanks would be virtual suicide; while if we kept them under cover, we might succeed in bluffing the enemy as to our true strength, since we might persuade him that we had good AP weapons. It was extremely hard to deny this request for fire support. On the other hand, I felt there would be no advantage in attempting to do the impossible. A few minutes later, one of the Westminster carriers which had come

over with Major Mahony, pushed out about 300 yards on his own initiative, apparently with the objective of securing the infantry's flank. Before he could see his danger, the enemy tanks swept in from the left front, cut him off and surrounded him. A few seconds later they moved back to their former positions with the carrier and any remaining members of its crew in the middle of them.

Shortly before dusk, we were attacked from the front by three Panthers followed at some distance by about 100 infantry. The tanks came in from about 400 yards firing HE as they came. Most of the fire was high. The airdrops were clipped off two of my tanks, but fortunately, there were no casualties. We fired everything we had from .50s to Tommy guns. We also fired PIATs, although the range was too long, with the objective of persuading the enemy that we had anti-tank weapons. This seemed to have succeeded, as the tanks swerved off at about 175 yards and did not press the attack. A few minutes later, the tanks again attacked and again we fired everything we had. I was climbing into my own tank to fire the .50 when an HE hit a few feet away. It knocked down the remaining aerial and spattered the vicinity with fragments. One of them scratched me on the cheek, but did no serious damage, although I was somewhat dazed from the concussion for several minutes. Visibility was becoming very limited and PIAT ammunition was running low. Fortunately the tanks once again did not press their attack, and when they withdrew, they did not again attack, although they remained in the vicinity about 1000 yards away and were a source of no little concern to us.

About this time, "C" Company of the Westminsters got across on our right. This strengthened the position considerably, although "B" Company which were crossing quite a long way to our left were unable to get over until after dark. We began to dig in, which we did with considerable enthusiasm as the enemy started to put over large numbers of Nebelwerfer bombs. Fortunately most of these were about 50 yards over, landing in the river bed where they caused no damage. This fire kept up for most of the night and our slit trenches which started out about nine inches deep, were a good four feet before morning.

Although I had spotted several good artillery targets, I had so far been unable to get artillery fire to bear on them. All of our Forward Observation Officers (FOOs) had either had their vehicles destroyed or were out of range of their guns. About this time I made another try for artillery support. I discovered that one of our scout cars was parked alongside a FOO tank. This tank had only one set which was on the battery frequency, but relaying messages through the scout car, I was able to talk to the FOO. The FOO turned out to belong to, of all things, a Jeep battery, but his guns were in action. The Jeep battery with its midget 75 mm guns had seemed rather comic when the operation was planned, but now the mighty mediums were silent and the Jeep guns did Yeoman service. Throughout the night, the FOO brought fire down on various targets which I indicated including the enemy tank harbour, areas in which movement was seen or heard and probable forming-up places. In all, the FOO fired about 1000 rounds, I do not know whether he did much damage. Still it must have worried the enemy some and the sound of our own guns was encouragement of the best kind.

Towards morning, the Nebelwerfer fire increased and from time-to-time there were bursts of Spandau fire. Several times the enemy went to the trouble of smoking our positions and each time we expected an immediate attack. Although the attack never materialized, it was a nerve-racking business. The Jeep battery played a part in discouraging the enemy — or perhaps he was only bluffing. At about 0500 hours I talked to several of my men about where the Nebelwerfer fire was coming from and got a fairly good idea of the general area. In response to my request, the Jeep guns shelled it and the Nebelwerfers were silent for nearly an hour. Later when they opened up again, the Jeep battery was too short of ammunition to repeat the process, but the adjutant whose tank, containing the rear link, was knocked out about half a mile from the river bank, saw an arty vehicle from 6th Armoured Division proceeding along the road. We rushed out on the road and stopped it. It turned out to contain a FOO from their SP regiment. Fortunately, this officer's guns were in action and he was willing to take on any

targets we could locate. I pointed out quite a number, using map references and corrections by the cardinal point system. Unfortunately we did not again succeed in silencing the Nebelwerfers and they continued to make things uncomfortable during most of the morning.

The house to my left which the Westminster Regiment had captured that previous evening, had to be abandoned during the night as our numbers were too small to hold it. The enemy had re-occupied it and was becoming very troublesome. At first light, the Westminster Regiment attacked and captured it suffering some casualties in the process.

An attack had been scheduled for first light by the Irish Regiment of Canada which was assembled on the rear bank ready to cross. This was postponed until 0930 hours and later until 1130 hours due to the difficulty of teeing up supporting fire. At about 0600 hours, the

CO ordered me to return to the rear bank. The situation was still not too secure and the heavy weapons of the recce troop made it of greater value than its numbers would indicate. I therefore requested permission to remain until the infantry attack was completed. This was granted. As the infantry attack went in, we fired our remaining ammunition to support it and at about 1215 hours we returned to the far bank after an extremely eventful 24 hours.

E.J. Perkins served with the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) in the Second World War. He won one of the few Distinguished Service Orders awarded to Lieutenants for his actions at the Melfa River.