

# Gallantry on the Moro - 8 December 1943

## Background

On 6 December 1943, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry Division under Major-General Chris Vokes, a Sapper, began a series of assaults on major crossing points along the Moro River along the eastern coast of Italy. The attacks were led by three infantry battalions and fighting was hard for two days and established two small bridgeheads over the Moro River. On December 8<sup>th</sup>, Vokes adjusted his plan to consolidate a larger bridgehead by launching a two-pronged attack out of the two smaller bridgeheads. The attack began in the afternoon with a massive artillery barrage with infantry following. During the night of 8/9 December, units of the Royal Canadian Engineers (RCE) built a bridge over the Moro allowing armour and equipment to move into San Leonardo the following day.



## Role of the RCE

The importance of the RCE in the Moro River Crossing is clearly illustrated by the fact three medals for gallantry were awarded to members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Company that night. The following from [History of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers, Vol II](#), describes their actions from a Sapper point of view.



3<sup>rd</sup> Field Company on the Moro 9 December 1943 -  
National Archives of Canada

The attack went in on schedule but the infantry did not have things all their own way. At 1800 hours, although the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Company had not yet received a success signal, Major Fraser decided that he could wait no longer. He sent a D-7 bulldozer and two sections off "to see what happens", the former sounding like a regiment of tanks! Nothing happened, and the operation was on. The near bank needed no heavy grading, so the bulldozer operator, Sapper M. C. McNaughton, was sent off to find his own route across the river. This he accomplished by moving up a draw, although he became silhouetted against the sky at one point and came under prompt machine-gun fire. At 2030 hours he started cutting down the far bank — a formidable cut varying from zero to 12 feet in a length of 80 feet. This took about seven hours. Construction of the near approach was sufficiently advanced by 2000 hours to enable the materials for a culvert to be brought forward. Over the culvert, a six-foot-high causeway was built. The dozers finished this task by 0400 hours. The crossing was ready for use by tanks at 0600 hours. Although the deviation came under shell, mortar and machine-gun fire at frequent intervals during the night, there were only three sapper casualties, and these but slightly wounded. Enemy fire, however, increased greatly after 0700 hours when the tanks finally began to clatter across and, during the morning, company maintenance parties had 22 wounded and one killed. For this operation, Major Fraser was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Sergeant O. L. Mellick and Sapper McNaughton each the Military Medal. General Montgomery personally congratulated the C.R.E.

## Citations

The role of each recipient is outlined in their award citations.

### **Distinguished Service Order - Fraser, Robin Bothwell, Major**

*On the night of 8/9 December 1943 the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division made an assault across the Moro River. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Field Company, under command Major Fraser, was given the vitally important task of constructing a tank crossing over which supporting arms could be brought up to the assistance of the forward troops. As Major Fraser well knew, the success of the operation very largely depended upon the success completion of his job by first light.*

*Although the bridgehead was not complete by 2200 hours, Major Fraser led small parties of his company to the site and began work, despite the presence of the enemy on the far bank. Throughout the night the work was interrupted by heavy mortar, shell and machine gun fire. Largely through Major Fraser's drive, ability and superb example to his men, work continued at the crossing and the task was completed on time.*

*After the tanks had crossed, maintenance on the crossing was essential. In daylight heavy casualties were suffered by the field company. Major Fraser, himself slightly wounded, saw his job accomplished, personally supervised the dressing of the wounded men and then skilfully extricated the remainder of his company. He himself was the last to leave the crossing.*

*To this officer's fine example and devotion to duty in difficult and very unpleasant conditions, as well as to his personal courage and technical ability can be attributed to a large extent the final success of the divisional plan.*

### **Military Medal - A 19257 Mellick, Oscar Lloyd, Lance Sergeant (Acting Sergeant)**

*On the night of 8 December 1943, 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Infantry brigade attacked across the River Moro, Italy. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, were detailed to build a diversion across the river where the infantry had established a bridgehead. At 1800 hours, not knowing whether the bridgehead had been successfully established, it was decided to move the company on to the task. Sergeant Mellick of No.3 Platoon displayed great devotion to duty and skill in organizing his platoon while under continual enemy fire. Largely through the efforts of Sergeant Mellick, tanks were able to cross the river at 0700 hours 9 December and success of the operations was assured. He continued courageously to lead his men and attend casualties until he himself was*

wounded at 1200 hours. His devotion to duty and coolness under fire are worthy of the highest praise.

**Military Medal - H102349 McNaughton, Milton Coll, Sapper**

*On the night of 8 December 1943, 1 Canadian Infantry brigade attacked across the River Moro, Italy. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, were to build a diversion across the river after the infantry has established a bridgehead. Sapper McNaughton with bulldozers was placed under the command of 3 Field Company to assist in this task. At 1800 hours, since it was not known whether the infantry had been successful, it was decided to send in a small party to commence work. Sapper McNaughton drove his machine down an exposed road to the bed of the river. He then reconnoitred a route across the river in order that he could start work on the enemy side of the river. This route at its most distant point was 400 yards from the river on the enemy side. Without the slightest hesitation, Sapper McNaughton began to walk to his machine along this route. At one point he was sky-lined and came under heavy machine gun fire but fully realising the urgency of his task he carried on. He reached the site and commenced working. Under continual machine gun, mortar and shell fire Sapper McNaughton quickly and skilfully cut down the far bank. On the initiative, skill and bravery of this operator depended the success of the whole operation, for without the supporting tanks which crossed the river at 0700 hours 9 December the infantry would have been in great difficulty.*