

FIRST BAILEY BRIDGE BUILT UNDER FIRE

The first Bailey Bridge built by the Allies under fire during the Second World War was constructed in Sicily by the 3rd Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, at Leonforte on the night of 21/22 July 1942.

The Bailey Bridge was used widely by Allied armies in Italy and Northwest Europe during the Second World War. Over 2500 Bailey bridges were built in the Italian campaign. The Bailey Bridge was a revolution in military engineering, enabling hand assembly to span a gap. Easily transportable, a small bridge could be erected in three hours by 40 men.



During the campaign in Sicily, on the night of 20/21 July 1942, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment led the advance of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade towards Leonforte. Moving at night to avoid enemy observation, they came upon the demolished bridge where the road crossed the last ravine. They bypassed the bridge and climbed up to the town at 7:00 AM that morning.

Although the area around the bridge was under heavy machine-gun fire, the Engineers soon determined that the ravine gap was about 50 feet wide. The construction of a bridge would have to wait until dark to reduce casualties.

That night, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, followed closely by the Engineers, advanced under heavy artillery fire. The infantry crossed the ravine near the demolished bridge and continued into the town, where house-to-house fighting developed. Meanwhile, 3rd Field Company began building a Bailey bridge across the ravine under continual enemy mortar and machine-gun fire.

The bridge was completed in less than five hours, but heavy fire on the approaches prevented vehicles from crossing until 7:00 AM. Because of the vital importance of this bridge, Lieutenant-Colonel G. Walsh, Commander of the Royal Canadian Engineers of the 1st Canadian Infantry Division, personally supervised the effort.

While the bridge was being built, Major K. J. Southern, the Company Commander, went forward with two of his men and a few infantry soldiers. They encountered a machine-gun post, an enemy infantry party and two tanks at the entrance to the town. After a brisk exchange of fire, Southern's party held the Germans at bay until he was reinforced with an anti-tank gun. The Germans then withdrew with some haste.

The Engineers won five of the 21 Canadian gallantry awards for the action at Leonforte. Major K.J. Southern and Lieutenant-Colonel G. Walsh received the Distinguished Service Order. Lieutenant N.W. Dickson, the Platoon Commander, received a Military Cross, and Sergeant R. R. McPhee received a Military Medal as the Bridge Commander. In the afternoon of the same day, Sapper L. A. Johnston received a Military Medal for making two trips on his motorcycle through heavy fire to transport his wounded colleagues to the rear area.

With the construction of the bridge at Leonforte on the night of 20/21 July 1942, the Royal Canadian Engineers hold the distinction of having built the first Bailey bridge under enemy fire during the Second World War.