

The RCMP Musical Ride and Corporate Sponsorship: New Skin for an Old Ceremony*

By D.L. Tencer

Springtime in Rockcliffe, Ontario. The snow has given way to fresh new lawns; the bare trees that line the Ottawa River have blossomed; the cold, short winter days have turned to long, warm spring days. Every year at this time a small armada of four tractor trailers hauling 36 horses and 41 police officers rolls out of the stables at the Canadian Police College, heading off to some distant part of the country. These are the trucks of the RCMP's Musical Ride — a performance given every year in various parts of Canada by a full troop of Mounties and horses, and a long-standing tradition in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But this year, there is something very different about the Musical Ride. For years, the Musical Ride's horses travelled in trucks painted blue and white, with a yellow strip — reminiscent of the colours of the Mountie uniform. This year, as the trucks rolled through Quebec, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Alberta, they were clothed in fiery red, white and black. The new design on the trucks — a cavalry of galloping Mounted horsemen, in black silhouette, against the backdrop of a waving Canadian flag — is not only a symbol of change in the Musical Ride, it is a symbol of change within the RCMP itself. And no less importantly, it is also an indication of the RCMP's commitment to its traditions and to Canada's heritage.

Indeed, the Musical Ride has long been a part of Canadian heritage, as have the Mounties themselves. The Musical Ride developed from a desire by members of the Force to amuse themselves, display their riding ability, of which they were very proud, and to entertain the community. The first known display of riding was given in 1876 by a troop trained by Sergeant Major Robert Belcher. With the building of an indoor riding school at "Depot" Division, Regina, in 1886, it became possible for extensive mounted training to continue during the winter months. Shortly after the erection of the riding school, a musical ride gave performances under the direction of Inspector W.G. Matthews, former Riding Master and Adjutant of a British cavalry regiment, the 3rd (King's Own) Hussars. Insp. Matthews was not the only member of the North-West Mounted Police who was a veteran of military cavalry — quite a few members were. So it is not surprising that the Musical Ride performances developed from traditional mounted cavalry displays. Over the centuries, there are numerous records of soldiers engaging in mounted tournaments, cavalcades and sports as an occasion to show off their ability to ride and their prowess with weapons. What distinguishes a musical ride from these traditional cavalry performances is the substitution of a brass band for a drill