

Its name was for an unofficial moment the "Mounted Rifles," but Prime Minister Sir John Macdonald scratched out the second word and wrote in Police. The commanding officer was called Commissioner, and the Police Force was semi-military with enlistments of three years. Men were recruited between ages eighteen and forty, and they had to ride horses well and be of good character. The immediate job of the first 150 was to stop liquor traffic among the Indians, to gain the Indians' respect and confidence, to collect customs and to do anything else that needed to be done. They went west from the head of Lake Superior and reached Red River in late October, 1873.

They gained and kept the confidence of the Blackfoot Confederation — Crees, Assinboines, and the Saulteaux — initially by finding and arresting the white border criminals who had massacred an Assinboine village. They became one of the three primary forces in the great West, along with the Blackfeet and the Hudson's Bay Company. When the Sioux wiped out Maj. General George A. Custer's 7th Cavalry at the Little Big Horn and fled across the border, Canada's 214 Mounted policemen had the difficult role of maintaining peace among them and the Blackfeet. In 1877 the Blackfeet under Crowfoot signed a permanent treaty with the Dominion, negotiated in part by the Commissioner of the Mounted Police. Crowfoot said, "The advice given me and my people has proved to be very good. If the Police had not come to this country where would we all be now. Bad men and whiskey were killing us so fast that very few would have been left. The Police have protected us as the feathers of the bird protect it from the frosts of winter."

The Government which the police represented was not equally beloved however. The Metis, half French and half Indian, and the Crees (under Poundmaker and Big Bear) revolted as eastern settlers moved in and surveyors began cutting up their land. The war began with a battle at Duck Lake and the Mounties lost. It finally ended two decades later when the Mounties arrested Louis Riel, the Metis leader, after he returned from exile in the U.S. and they saw him hanged.

In the Yukon gold strike ninety-six Mounties became the law among the thousands of stampeding gold rushers. As the Mounties' official history says, "there were surprisingly few murders."

In 1899, 245 Mounties went to South Africa for the Boer War, and in 1904 King Edward VII gave the force the prefix Royal.

In 1918 one RCMP squad went to France for the end of World War I and another to Siberia for the settling of the Russian revolution.

In the same year the RCMP was given jurisdiction in all the vast land west of Port Arthur and Fort William and its authorized strength was increased to 1,200. In 1923 it set up a post at Ellesmere Island, the edge of the arctic, and the celebrated arctic patrols began. In 1932 the Marine Section was begun and the traditional Mounties' fur hat — of which one Commissioner would say "a more useless type of fur hat never existed" — was abandoned. It was a symbolic dropping of a symbol, for the force would keep its original semi-military structure, while gradually shedding the trappings.

In 1966 Commissioner George B. McClellan phased out the wide-brimmed hats, spurs, and the horse from the regular service and training. (A special group performing the "Musical Ride" at home and in the U.S. retains all three, and some conspicuous Mounties stationed at places such as Parliament Hill in Ottawa are still resplendent in hat, boots and breeches.)

In 1959 the force still had over two hundred working sled huskies, but in 1969 Constable Warren Townsend and Special Constable Peter Benjamin, a Loucheux Indian, made the last dog patrol, two hundred miles, from Old Crow to Fort McPherson in the Northwest Territories, in minus four degree weather, with twenty-one purebred Siberian huskies, accompanied by a newspaper reporter and a photographer on snowmobiles.

They carried mail and they ate a supper out in the open of caribou, macaroni, canned fruit, bread, and moose milk. (Moose milk was not drawn from moose. Despite the RCMP prohibition on public drinking, it was over-proof Navy rum, condensed milk, a dollop of sugar and hot water made from snow.)

The RCMP was now handling counterfeiting, narcotic cases, smuggling, national security and counterespionage, as well as being the primary criminal police force in eight of the ten provinces and in 122 towns and villages. It had sixty-three ships and patrol boats in its marine division and eighteen aircraft in the air.

It was also beginning to be aware that the old image of the force was not the beacon for the young that it had once been. Commissioner McClellan noted that in spite of his determination to make the force both an efficient and attractive one, "policemen are badly abused and it is getting more difficult to get young men to take that kind of abuse."

Changing times were changing concepts. Police forces in major cities throughout the Continent were painfully moving from the rigidity of military hierarchy toward looser structure.

The RCMP was also examining itself critically, with some help from the Government in Ottawa.