

# Fiftieth Anniversary of RCMP Forensic Laboratories

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1987 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the RCMP's Crime Detection Laboratories. What began in Maurice Powers' living quarters at Depot has evolved into a network of labs across Canada providing detailed information for police investigations, expert testimony for cases before the courts and scientific advice and training assistance to courts and other law enforcement agencies.

In 1931, Commissioner J.H. MacBrien solicited the opinions and comments of, among others, Scotland Yard and the FBI, about "a modern, up-to-date laboratory to deal with the detection of crime from a scientific standpoint." After careful planning, the RCMP's first Crime Detection Laboratory was established at Regina in 1937, with Surgeon Maurice Powers in charge.

Powers was inducted into the Force as an assistant surgeon and "Special Constable" on December 30, 1936. Already an M.D. and a C.M. (Master of Surgery), in the summer of 1939, the Rockland, Ont. native received his degree of Doctor of Medical Science in Forensic Medicine. This was a special accomplishment in that he was the first person in North America to have received such a degree. With a capable and hard-working staff, including Lance Corporal James "Robbie" Robinson (hair and fibre examination), Corporals S.H. Lett (document examiner) and John Mallow (analytical chemistry casework) and Sgt. J.A. Churchman (firearms and toolmark identification), Powers created a highly respected and efficient lab. Prior to starting the Regina lab, Powers studied

under the Chief Medical Examiner in New York City, where he performed more than 150 autopsies on cases of violent and suspicious deaths. Powers also toured the FBI labs and other prominent facilities in the United States, looking for ways in which the RCMP's new laboratory could emulate, or improve upon, those successful operations.

Tragically, Surgeon Maurice Powers' career was cut short on October 19, 1943, when an aircraft carrying him, an assistant, Cpl. B.J. Ford-Smith, and pilot A.A. Green, crashed enroute from North Battleford to Saskatoon. The plane had undergone a pre-flight inspection and had been certified for night flight, but inclement weather doomed what was hoped to be a one-hour voyage. The pilot was attempting to return to North Battleford when the plane struck telephone wires and came to rest a short distance from the airfield, killing all three passengers. The lab's first director had been taken much too soon, but his legacy lived on in the determined work of his successors.

After the Regina lab opened in 1937, the Force established laboratories at Ottawa/Rockcliffe in 1942, Sackville N.B., 1957, Vancouver in 1963, Edmonton, 1969, Winnipeg in 1970, and Halifax and Montreal in 1979. Today the Force employs over 350 qualified personnel across Canada, each supplying their own specialized expertise to the scientific battle against crime and criminals.

It is a basic fact that a capable law enforcement agency cannot function without forensic lab services, but it is