

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police

Immortalized by Hollywood movies, the red-coated, broad-hatted Mountie has become one of the most widely recognized symbols of Canada. The colourful RCMP musical ride, an exhibition of horseback set to music, is a popular attraction in Canada and abroad.

But the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is not simply a part of the Canadian mythology, and its activities are not confined to equestrian displays. The RCMP is Canada's national police force, and it has earned an international reputation as one of the best in the world.

Origins

The RCMP was established more than a century ago as the North-West Mounted Police, a "temporary" experiment in rural policing.

In the early days of Canada's settlement, there was no major police force. At the time of Canada's Confederation in 1867, the largest cities of Montreal and Toronto had few full-time constables. Only the small Dominion Police force upheld federal laws. Small towns and rural areas, however, had no police: laws were enforced by temporary court-appointed constables or soldiers.

In 1870, when Canada bought the land north of the U.S. border between the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains, the Canadian government decided a law enforcement agency was needed. In this vast, sparsely populated area, the sudden large influx of settlers into traditional Indian lands could lead to violence, if not handled properly. The Canadian government wanted a better way to deal with land settlement and was concerned that the Aboriginal peoples should be treated fairly.

The Government decided to create a para-military police force to maintain order until the western lands were occupied by settlers who respected traditional institutions. This force, established in 1873, came to be called the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP). It was intended that it be disbanded once the territory was settled peacefully.

At first there were 150 recruits to the force, but this was soon increased to 300. The NWMP officers covered their territory on horseback and wore their now-famous red tunics.

Transition

Over the years, the NWMP established close relations with the Indians, preparing them for treaty negotiations and mediating conflicts with the settlers.

The force was increased to 500 in 1883 and given new responsibilities, including the duty of preserving the peace during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. After the 1885 Métis uprising led by Louis Riel, the NWMP increased again to a 1000-member force.

A full-scale gold rush in the Yukon at the turn of the century carried the potential for violence as prospectors converged from all over the world into the territory. The presence of the NWMP ensured the gold rush was orderly.

After that, the NWMP turned its attention to the Arctic; the force opened detachments aimed at stemming reported abuse of natives as well as countering threats to Canadian sovereignty by expansionist European nations.

By this time, the NWMP was tacitly accepted as a permanent institution. In 1904, King Edward VII added the term "Royal" to the force's name in recognition of its services to the Crown. In 1920, the RNWMP became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and was officially expanded into a national police force. In the same year, its headquarters was moved from Regina (in the province of Saskatchewan) to Canada's capital, Ottawa.

In 1928, the RCMP began performing police duties in areas beyond federal jurisdiction on contract with different provinces and municipalities. Canada's Constitution defines law enforcement as a provincial responsibility. But a majority of provinces decided they could meet this responsibility most effectively through the services of the RCMP.

The RCMP's role is essentially that of "keeping the peace," but it has made important contributions to Canada's efforts in times of war. Members served overseas in the Boer War in South Africa and during both world wars.

The RCMP Today

Today the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is commanded by a commissioner who reports to the federal government and to the attorneys-general of those provinces where the RCMP provides provincial police services.

With more than 16 000 peace officers and about 5000 civilian employees, the force maintains six crime detection laboratories across Canada and a computerized police information centre in Ottawa. The RCMP also maintains a training academy in Regina and the Canadian