

The Long March to the Klondike

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This year marks the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and this event will be commemorated in a plethora of events held in honour of our colourful history. However, there is a lesser known anniversary in 1998 which also commemorates an historical event related to the RCMP: the 100th anniversary of the Yukon Field Force.

Following the discovery of gold outside Dawson City in 1896, a flood of Canadians and Americans headed north to the Yukon Territory — increasing the population practically overnight and stretching available resources to the limit. Along with those seeking fortunes in the gold fields, came the inevitable mix of business people (legitimate and illegitimate), criminals, camp followers and general transients. This great influx of people into the region also had a profound effect on the First Nations of the Yukon Territory. Thankfully, the 25-year-old North-West Mounted Police appeared on the scene under the command of Supt. Samuel Steele and the reputation of the Force was solidified and enhanced in a manner on which much has been written and discussed.

It soon became evident that policing duties combined with administrative and clerical duties were taxing the resources of the NWMP beyond capacity. As more people began moving into the region and more gold was being found, more resources were needed to handle law enforcement duties in the

Yukon. The solution came about in what was to become one of the first joint-forces operations in the Force's history.

The federal government decided that a body of 200 regular soldiers from the Canadian Army would set out from Ottawa to assist police in the Yukon in whatever duties they could manage. Under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel T.D.B. Evans of the Royal Canadian Dragoons Cavalry Regiment, the "Yukon Field Force" as it was termed by the government, would set out to reach the Yukon to assist the NWMP. But first, it was necessary to procure winter supplies and prepare the soldiers for the task ahead.

It is significant to note that such a move by the government was overtly political, because the question of the Yukon Territory being taken over by the United States and the influx of American nationals into the region had become a serious dilemma for the federal government. Indeed, the use of soldiers as opposed to more police was seen in some quarters as potentially provocative to those who called for the annexation of the Yukon to U.S. territory.

The voyage to the Yukon would have been a comparatively simple one if the Yukon Field Force had been allowed to use the usual route to Skagway or Dyea via a steamer from Vancouver, then to the gold fields via the Chilkoot or White Passes. However, politics entered into play once again, and the Yukon