

Third Page

City Editor Al Rosseker - 565-8300

'Turbocop' doing just fine, thanks

By BERNARD PILON
of The Leader-Post

Rumors of turbaned Sikh RCMP officer's near-demise have been greatly exaggerated

Pick a rumor, any rumor. There's one about how Baltej Singh Dhillon — Canada's first turbaned RCMP officer — was mangled in a serious car wreck.

There's another insisting the 25-year-old constable has left the Mounties, that the Sikh turned into human jelly after a pummelling (or two or five or 10) from rough-and-tumble loggers in no-nonsense Quesnel, B.C.

No? How about the one that swears RCMP officer No. 42848 trimmed his locks to fit in with the 22,000-odd other members of Canada's national police force, jettisoning his religious beliefs in the process because he couldn't handle the pressure.

"Let me tell you, this rumor about me quitting started the second week I was here," Dhillon said from his Quesnel home Monday night, a few hours before starting his 11 p.m.-8

"There are senior Mounties across the country who still feel there's no place for women and ethnic minorities."

— Baltej Singh Dhillon



a.m. "graveyard" shift patrolling the central B.C. logging community. "Back then, I got a call from CBC or a paper in Vancouver. From then

on, it's been on and off." The difference now is that fellow officers are among those whipping up the stories — something Dhillon

blames on old-guard elements who've never accepted female constables, part of the RCMP since 1974, and visible minorities for changing the force's former white male persona.

"There are senior Mounties across the country who still feel there's no place for women and ethnic minorities. I'm sure, to this date, there are those who still hold those feelings strongly."

In Quesnel, a pulp-mill town that counts up to 7,000 East Indians among its 30,000 population, teenagers call him "Turbocop." The pun on his royal blue-and-yellow turban is one Dhillon sees as a backhanded compliment rather than derogatory.

Colleagues in Dhillon's 32-officer detachment, meanwhile, have had RCMP in other B.C. towns tell them they heard he got "all beaten up" in a bar brawl, he said.

That has never happened. Nor has anyone been able to find a

\$2,000 prize supposedly offered by a Quesnel bar for the first person who knocks off Dhillon's turban. Dhillon told of a reporter from Prince Rupert who tried to check the story out, only to be told by every club in town the "next place" had it.

"She went full circle. There was no pot."

The irony of fellow officers also passing on rumors doesn't escape the former supermarket security guard. Nor are the in-house stories new.

Before the multilingual native of Malaysia graduated from Regina's RCMP training academy on May 13, 1991, tales swirled about how the slight six-footer was exempted from swimming classes because it would dampen his turban. Gossip also gave Dhillon his own room and private showers instead of dormitory-style "pits" shared by fellow recruits in Troop 20.

Dhillon believes the rumors, then

as now, arise out of a desire to see him fail.

His successful completion of the RCMP's six-month basic training only hardened that opposition. "Everything's being slapped back in these people's faces. So they make up these rumors."

"It's getting to be a pain in the butt. I beat them at every point. They're losing the battle. I wish they would quit. I've proved myself."

The citizens of Quesnel seem to agree. Dhillon described the people there as "great," adding he hasn't had to deal with any conflicts regular officers don't also face.

"Let me give you a rumor to start," Dhillon said after chuckling over one of the more outrageous stories.

"Dhillon unravelled his (impossible to unravel) turban to pull a guy out of the river to save his life. That's a good rumor for you."