

The Sunday Leader



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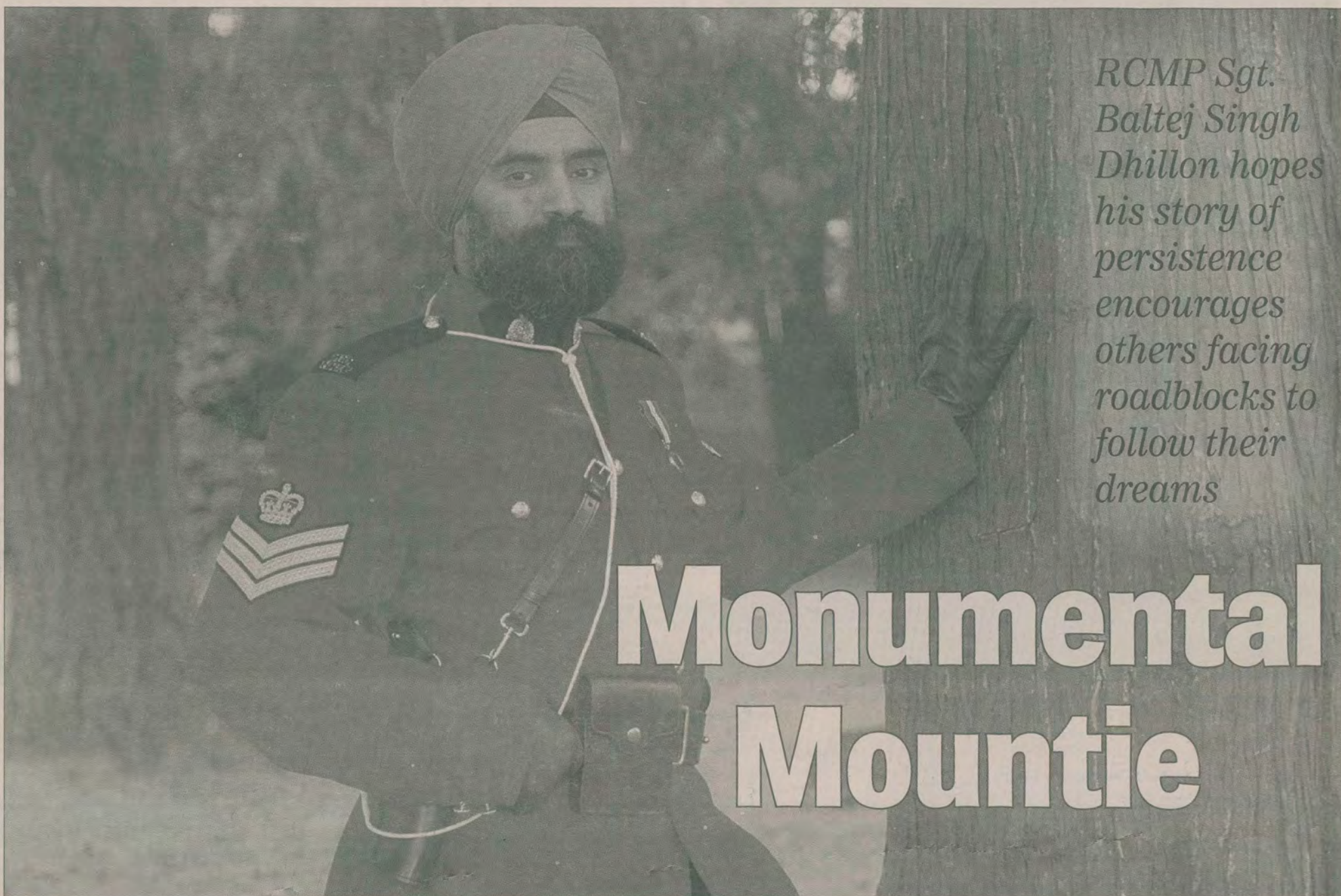
News

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On the front

Fifteen years ago, Sgt. Baltej Singh Dhillon was the first Mountie allowed to wear a turban, forever changing the look of the RCMP. Today, the married father of two is a polygraph examiner and investigator with several high-profile cases under his watch.

KARI MEDIG / BLACK PRESS



RCMP Sgt. Baltej Singh Dhillon hopes his story of persistence encourages others facing roadblocks to follow their dreams

Monumental Mountie

This May marks 15 years after Baltej Singh Dhillon's graduation from the RCMP training depot in Regina. Dhillon is the first turban-wearing Sikh to be welcomed into the ranks.

PHOTOS BY KARI MEDIG / BLACK PRESS

LARA GERRITS
Staff Reporter

It was a moment he'll never forget.

With his mother, wife and nephew proudly watching, Baltej Singh Dhillon, then 24, was sworn into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on Aug. 30, 1990.

More than 15 years later, the seasoned sergeant and polygraph examiner for B.C.'s major crime unit remembers the achievement with a subtle smile.

"I was ecstatic, I was overjoyed. It was the first step to having my dream achieved, it was a great thing."

Although acceptance into the RCMP is a milestone in life for most young officers-to-be, for Dhillon, it was so much more.

Prior to him, no Sikh man with a turban and beard had ever been welcomed into the prestigious ranks.

A soft-spoken father-of-two, Dhillon reflects on his years-long journey, carefully relaying his history – from his birth in Malaysia to his immigration to Canada as a teen.

He attended Frank Hurt Secondary in Newton, and took jobs on farms across the Fraser Valley to help support the family – including his brother and sister-in-law, who sponsored his Canadian citizenship on compassionate grounds after his father's death.

"We were probably the only kids in school who wanted summer holidays to be delayed," he chuckles, a surprising reaction from a tough investigator known for work on high-profile cases that include Air India and Robert Pickton.

"This work is nothing compared to working on the farms."

During his youth, Dhillon had always dreamed of a career in criminal law, attending Kwantlen University College and Simon Fraser University's criminology programs with plans to attend law school. But while volunteering with the

Surrey RCMP Block Watch program to boost his application, something clicked in the driven young man, who with a neat bundle of dark fabric atop his head and full face of hair, stood out from the officers alongside him.

"There wasn't a very strong (ethnic) representation of RCMP 15 years ago," he says.

Volunteering with the police and seeing firsthand the difference they make in the lives of those desperate for help turned Dhillon on to the career. A strong sense of job satisfaction displayed by members helped, too.

"I was very, very enthralled by that."

Plans for law school were halted, taken over by new dreams of serving his country and community.

"I felt that there was a great need for police officers with my

language ability and connections to the community."

Dhillon, now 39, speaks not only English, but Malay, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and enough French to get by.

After an initial interview with an RCMP recruiter in 1989, however, the devout Sikh man learned his goals wouldn't be as easy to achieve as initially planned. He remembers the conversation vividly when asked to trade in his turban – thus his faith – for the RCMP's staple Stetson.

"I was asked that day, 'Would you?' and I said, 'No, I would not.'"

There were no provisions nor allowances for him to wear his turban or beard; policy was strict. But Dhillon wasn't discouraged.

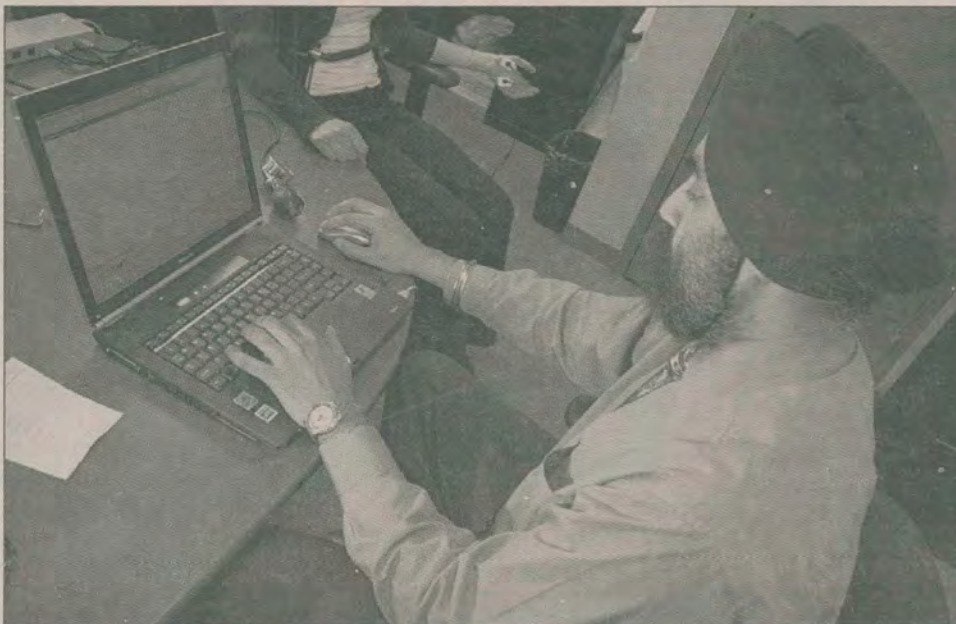
"Being able to help and assist in that fashion (as Mountie) was very appealing to me. It was very appealing to my soul."

In April 1989, in response to Dhillon's situation, RCMP commissioner Norman Inkster recommended the prohibition against turbans be lifted and uniform requests be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

But the federal solicitor general at the time, Pierre Blais, wasn't ready to immediately adopt Inkster's ideas.

"That was the first time where the recommendations of the RCMP commissioner were being questioned," Dhillon says pointedly.

The months of deliberation weren't easy ones for Dhillon. He was inundated by requests for interviews from the media – not only in Canada but internationally – who had gotten wind of the debate. Protesters made buttons of a no-entry sign stamped over the face of a Sikh officer and went as far as erecting signs on street corners. Newspapers were fluttered with letters to the editor and Dhillon was depicted in cartoons, often unfavourably.



Dhillon, a polygraph examiner for B.C.'s major crime unit, demonstrates his equipment at a Newton RCMP office.

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Baltej Singh Dhillon (second from left) stands with his comrades in Regina during RCMP graduation day on May 13, 1991.

PHOTO SUBMITTED

RCMP: 'I'm still here. At the end of the day, all our differences were put aside'

From Page 11

"I never knew that it would be that big... It was alive."

One protester, Heman Bittner, even created an unflattering 12-month calendar protesting the notion of Sikh officers donning turbans in the RCMP.

"Am I really a racist, or am I standing up and trying to save something that you know can be lost forever?" the Alberta man said in an interview.

After 10 months and a change in cabinet, new solicitor general Pierre Cadieux ruled that under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Dhillon was entitled to wear his turban and could begin training in Regina. He graduated May 13, 1991.

Although a monumental day, questions still linger about why the decision was such a controversial one in the first place.

"I tried to get this across," Dhillon begins. "Think of what you are

asking me to do? You want people to have confidence (in the RCMP) yet you're asking me to compromise my integrity?"

"It didn't make sense and it didn't align itself with me."

However, the obstacles separating Dhillon from his dreams were never large enough to spark even the thought of giving up.

"To be dissuaded by process wouldn't really speak highly of me. The people who created those buttons and letters were not the people on the street who I met. These were people who didn't know me."

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the monumental year in RCMP history, a year where more than a century of thinking was changed to reflect a country's evolving demographic.

"For those of you who didn't think I'd last a day, I'm still here," Dhillon says proudly. "At the end of the day, all our differences were put aside."



Dhillon and his mother Jaswant Kaur in 1991.

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