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by Carla Garrett

Nestled between Aylmer and Springfield on 168 acres of picturesque countryside, the Ontario Police College (OPC) has been a home away from home for every police officer in the province since 1962. Any recruit will tell you it's no five-star hotel, but its professionalism and quality of training has never wavered.

The OPC is celebrating 50 years of training excellence. The college in the middle of a cornfield is the envy of many. The unique concept of a centralized police college has set a new standard for police training throughout the world.

"Ontario is very well served by what we have here," says OPC Acting Director Bill Stephens. "The college has a reputation of excellence throughout the world."

In other countries, there are as many training institutions as departments.

"We are consistent in our training, so that no matter where you are stopped in the province, the response is the same," says Stephens, a former Windsor Police officer and OPC graduate.

There are more than 26,000 police officers in Ontario. Each one was taught the same way to make an arrest and fire a gun – and knows what it's like to live in a pod for weeks.

"Every police officer shares that common bond; there is a sense of family and friendship with all police across the province," says former Sarnia Sgt. John Hutton, OPC protocol officer. "It's (the college) where the brotherhood and sisterhood join for one purpose; to do the best we can."

This extraordinary fraternity encompasses even current community safety commissioner Dan Hefky and deputy minister Ian Davidson, both OPC training graduates.

The pride in the college's 50-year history is evident by the pictures of past recruits, directors and instructors that hang on the walls



throughout the campus.

"It's their college," says Stephens. "Anyone who has been through here has an affinity for the college."

A number of initiatives have been planned to celebrate this milestone. The most notable event will be held July 12 – marking the day the college was officially announced 50 years ago.

A number of dignitaries have been invited to OPC that day, including students from Class 1. A time capsule will be dedicated at the march past ceremony for future officers to open at OPC's 100th anniversary.

"It will be a busy year where we celebrate our past and look forward to an exciting future," says Stephens.

The college is also opening its doors to the public for Doors Open Elgin County this fall.

Life in the barracks

Patience and debauchery, combined with a lot of resilience, carried young man in the first OPC class through nine weeks of training.

Retired S/Sgt. Jim Forbes of Thunder Bay police was 22 years old when he found himself unpacking his bags in the barracks of the old Royal Canadian Air Force Station. Consisting of temporary wooden buildings, the station was used in the 1940s for training pilots and was designed to last through

victory in Europe and Japan.

The young recruit vividly remembers his quarters in the old barrack huts. There was a bed and small work area attached to a six-foot metal room divider. Thirty-two men stayed in a single room.

"We had to keep telling ourselves that we were the first class ever and we had to be patient and a little flexible to the trials and tribulations we would encounter," says Forbes.

The first class arrived in January 1963. In that first year, 654 recruits were trained and 737 experienced officers went for refresher training.

The food was "horrible" and the remote location just kilometers out of Aylmer offered little entertainment, but that didn't stop recruits from making their own fun.

"We weren't always doing positive things in the sleeping quarters," Forbes says.

There was the poor guy who was handcuffed to the steam pipe, snowball fights, races in cruisers along the old runway and even a break and enter in the OPC kitchen.

After all the kitchen staff had gone home for the weekend, Forbes says, the famished recruits found an unlocked window and went in for a snack. "I don't recall what food was available but it slaked our hunger."

The entire OPC experience left an "indelible mark" on Forbes, who went on to have a long and successful career. "There was a genuine spirit of fellowship at college, at least at our level," he says.

Much has changed since those first classes, says Stephens. OPC is now a fixture for Ontario police officers.

The registrar reports the college has 162,639 student training records, including the more than 42,000 recruits who have attended since 1962.

The ingenious idea of creating a centralized police training facility for Ontario was born in the early 1950s. At the time only about



a quarter of the province's 300 forces carried out informal training.

"Where training was provided, it was focused almost exclusively on uniform issues," says Stephens, adding only larger departments provided any instruction in traffic, criminal investigation and identification.

There was no co-ordinating body for police training in the province until OPC was established. An amendment to the police act was enacted in 1960, followed by the creation of the Ontario Police Commission, which would have authority over the new college.

A number of municipalities expressed interest but with the help of influential politician Ron MacNeil, Aylmer was eventually selected as its home. Air force training at the RCAF station had been grounded, making way for a new era. Ontario's attorney general announced the establishment of the new college on July 12, 1962.

The OPC's purpose was "to improve policing in the Province of Ontario by creating training facilities which will make police work a profession and consequently attract men of quality into the profession."

It wasn't until the mid-70s that OPC welcomed its first female officers. "It was a very positive change," says Stephens, adding almost 22 per cent of recruits are now women.

In its first year, the college also rolled out a general police-training course for experienced officers who hadn't been trained. As the profession gained momentum, so did OPC. More courses were added, instructors hired and space minimized.

A \$28-million addition officially opened in May 1977 to meet the increasing demand. Throughout the '80s several working groups formed to hone the business side of the college and address the long-term issues facing police training.

A family of honour

One hundred and 73 recruits were recently introduced to their quarters at OPC. Just as the thousands before them, these bright-eyed men and women from across the province will experience what it's like to get their "BA." Not a Bachelor of Arts, but to say they have "Been to Aylmer" – a common joke in the 70s and 80s.

If you haven't been to the college in the last 10 years, you will find it looking much the same. In fact, many of the same pictures still hang on the walls, documenting OPC's rich history and infamous staff and students. The same

tables and chairs await you in Mennill Hall and the same pods invoke nostalgia like no other.

"As soon as you walk in the door there is a feeling of comfort," says former recruit Briane Fleming. "I have always had a soft spot for the college."

Each year, almost 10,000 students attend courses offered by OPC both on and off site. The college's largest recruit intake was 420 students in January 2002.

Aside from providing top-notch training to its students, the college also offers a superior work environment.

Fleming trained at the college in 1977 and returned as a seconded instructor in 1988. He was hired full time in 2002 after retiring from Peel Regional police.

"It's like I died and went to workplace heaven," he says, adding, "I have enjoyed all my experiences here." He is currently team leader for academic training for the basic constable course.

OPC is among the largest employers in Malahide Township with a staff of 170. This includes 40 seconded instructors and 45 permanent instructors.

"We have highly skilled and experienced staff here," says Stephens. "They want to be here, because they chose to be here."

Fleming adds there is "tremendous value and confidence in what we do here."

That includes everyone from the director and instructors to the cleaning staff and kitchen crew.

Each year, OPC kitchen staff prepares almost 300,000 meals. The menu includes lean meats, a salad bar and gluten-free products.

"The menu has come a long way," says Phyllis Therrien, who has worked in food services there since the early 1980s. There is more variety now, better quality meats and more educated chefs, she says.

"It's a very clean atmosphere with high standards," says Therrien, adding it's the people around her who make her job at OPC so enjoyable. "We are a family."

That sense of family has been a constant for 50 years and will be invaluable as staff work towards a sustainable future for OPC.

Becoming self-sufficient

The OPC is embracing technology as its key to another 50 years of success. From course development to program delivery, its future is online.

"We are in a period of transition, as we move from only using traditional classroom based instruction to include other methods of training, such as webinars, e-learning, video-instruction and other emerging technologies," says Stephens.

This does not mean they are abandoning their traditional approach, he adds, but will enhance how they do business to meet all of their stakeholder needs.

"The future for OPC is very bright," says Stephens.

With some external pressure from the infamous Drummond Report, alternative delivery models for police training are in development. Partnerships have been made and staff hired to carry out this transformation.

Last year marked the first step for initiating technological change with the installation of wireless Internet throughout the college.

"This has allowed our students more opportunities to connect with home and make use of technology for their course work," says Stephens.

They also plan to move towards a paperless recruit program, he adds, reducing the 5.3 million pages of paper OPC produces each year.

This new direction will not only be more effective in connecting with students from the information age but will also provide a more efficient business model in a frugal economy.

More affordable access to web-based technologies has opened the doors to more distance learning opportunities, which will be available to experienced police officers.

"Students have to come here for recruit training but we want them to make OPC their choice for all of their training," says Stephens.

In September, OPC will offer its front line supervisor course online, as well as pilot introduction to crime prevention and community policing. A video-based homicide course, in partnership with the OPP, has also been developed.

As always, recruit, forensic and other highly specialized training will still be offered on-site, including driving and firearms instruction in the recently renovated ranges.

"While we move towards the future, we're very conscious of our proud history and our traditions... those will never be forgotten," Stephens says.

"There are some significant changes underway... and they will put the college in a better position for the future."