

# RCMP officers given controversial award

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The RCMP has handed its highest departmental award to four officers for their role in a controversial sting operation in which one of them died during an undercover drug purchase in Thailand.

In addition to the 1989 death of Corporal Derek Flanagan, Operation Deception was marred by allegations of abuse of power by the police officers, who were accused of tricking a Canadian named Alain Olivier into arranging a heroin purchase for them in Thailand.

Convicted in a Bangkok court of heroin trafficking, Mr. Olivier got a death sentence that was reduced to a 30-year term.

Now back in Canada and out on parole in Montreal, Mr. Olivier is suing the RCMP for \$27.5-million, saying that he was a scapegoat and lured into an entrapment operation.

In his suit, Mr. Olivier says that the 8 ½ years he spent in gruesome conditions in a Bangkok jail stemmed from the "cynicism, incompetence, actions and illegal omissions of the Canadian state."

Cpl. Flanagan died in a Chiang Mai back lane on Feb. 19, 1989, in the confusion of a nighttime tussle with a suspected heroin trafficker.

Last week, Cpl. Flanagan was among 21 people RCMP Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli honoured with awards in Vancouver.

Cpl. Flanagan was named posthumously.

He and three officers involved in the operation -- Sergeant James Girdlestone, Staff-Sergeant Jack Dop and Staff-Sergeant Barry Bennett -- received the Commissioner's Commendation for Outstanding Service.

They were thanked for "their innovation, dedication and professionalism" during Operation Deception.

The Commendations for Outstanding Service are given to officers whose actions are "exceptionally innovative, unique and far beyond that which would be expected," the RCMP said in an announcement after the ceremony.

When asked why awards were given in such a controversial case, Staff-Sergeant Paul Marsh, the RCMP's national spokesman in Ottawa, said in an interview this week that the commendations were "in keeping with past precedents and awarding criteria."

He said he could not comment further.

"They're giving awards for an operation that's the object of a lawsuit. They could have waited to see how it's settled," Mr. Olivier, now a stage technician, said in an interview.

Mr. Olivier was a labourer and junkie in British Columbia's Lower Mainland when RCMP agents posing as drug traffickers approached him. Mr. Olivier had no criminal record.

They pressed him into flying to Thailand with them to buy heroin. Mr. Olivier didn't realize they were police officers and later said he went along because, thinking he was dealing with major criminals, he was afraid for his life.

In Chiang Mai, Mr. Olivier found some locals willing to sell 2.4 kilograms of heroin. The purchase went wrong, however, and Cpl. Flanagan, who was working undercover, was killed. Afterward, the RCMP public complaints commission launched a full-scale investigation into the operation.

One member of the watchdog body, Paul McEwen, wrote a critical draft report. In it, he said that the agents relied too much on an informant who claimed that Mr. Olivier was a big-time trafficker who could be used as a bait in a sting operation. The informant, Glen Barry, alias Jean-Marie Leblanc, was described by witnesses in later court cases as a liar.

Released in 1991, the final report of the complaints commission was more tame. It only said that the Mounties disobeyed the ministerial guidelines for RCMP overseas operations.

In a 1996 interview with The Globe and Mail, Mr. McEwen criticized the

RCMP because "they spent a million bucks on an operation that scored two kilos of dope that in Thailand was worth maybe \$10,000."

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