

Interview of Edith Merrifield

I wanted to travel and take different courses in the Army. We listened to the news and we got the Leader Post. This was how I had heard and I was interested in joining up. At that time, you see, the Indian people were fighting against sending their boys or girls in the army. I didn't pay any attention to that. I just came into Regina and joined up. They just felt if they had come into Canada to start a war than we would defend the country. They didn't feel that it was a good idea for the young people to join.

ENLISTMENT

I came up to Regina with my girlfriend, she was rejected because she was a pound under weight. You have to weigh a certain amount. They were taking anyone at all as long as you fit the requirements. You had to have Grade 8. I stayed in Regina, like they give you different tests, IQ tests and all that. So, when I was sworn in, then they sent us to Vermillion, Alberta for training. We went there for training and then I was posted back to Regina. I applied for B.C. so they sent me down East instead.

We had gas training, you know tear gas. We went out in the fields and had map reading, how to use a rifle, not too much of that. We did a lot of parade square. The whole battalion used to march a certain time, men and women, through the fields. We were separate, but we were in the same camp. We took group marches.

The men respected us. It was real nice. I met a lot of nice people.

I would like to mention something. When I left LeBret School I was only Grade 4. If you had joined the army, they wanted a certificate for Grade 8. I didn't have the Grade 8. So, I phoned my Indian Agent and I told him the situation I was in. He said, "I'll fix that." So, he came out with a Grade 8 certificate.

He was the type of agent that wanted to see the Indians better themselves. He knew that if I had stayed on that farm, I would have remained at a Grade 4 level.

I used to do a lot of reading. Magazines and text books. My dad used to like reading too. My Dad didn't know I had

enlisted, you see. I came to Regina to do some shopping. He used to get the Leader Post everyday. Anyway, they rejected my friend. I went down to see one of my friends here. I walked in and he told me I was on the front page on the paper. My Dad got the paper everyday.

I was the second Indian girl to join the army. The first was Mary Greyeyes. I met Mary did, before I took my training. She was stationed here.

We were all just one big family. But, the civilian girls didn't like us. They felt us that we were in there just to please the men, I guess. When I was down East, I was in the military police. We used to patrol uptown. The army girls and the civilian girls would start scrapping over this. They would pass remarks and I would have to run some of my friends in. We were asked what we wanted to take in the Army. So I took a course in that. This was down East, in Kingston.

I was stationed in Ottawa, too. That's where I met my husband.

He was a pilot in the Air Force. The girls were supposed to replace the men so that they could go over. I met him in Ottawa. He was home for a few months. It used to bother him when they dropped bombs over cities in Germany - the people they were killing, innocent people. At first, he used to talk about it. He would feel bad that he was killing these women and children.

After we were married about 5 years, I used to talk to him a lot about it.

During the war I was back and forth - Calgary, Edmonton, Ottawa and Kingston. I was transferred back to Regina. I was here as a clerk in the Supply Depot. I didn't care too much for it so I applied for Military Police. I had to take a course while I was here. They taught us about all the supplies coming. We had to figure out how many cases. The army men used to come in for all their supplies like sugar, and all that. We had to weigh that. We had to keep stock of all the supplies. Actually it wasn't that hard. I was here about 5 months, then I put in a transfer for down East, well, B.C. actually and they sent me the other way. This was in 1943. I was here until 1943 and then I was transferred down East. We had a little guard house in our quarters. We had to check them in and out. Usually some of the

girls had it in for us, but I didn't allow them to do anything. I took my discharge in Ottawa. I was going to live there. I lived there for 26 years.

BEFORE THE WAR: THE LEBRET RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

There was sad thing that happened in my family there. My younger sister had pneumonia and they didn't take her to the hospital soon enough. The nuns were like that. By the time they got her into the hospital, we had a little hospital at the LeBret School, she was almost dead. They just left her until she got so bad. Then they put her in the hospital. They tapped her lung to get the fluid out of her lung. At that time, that wasn't too successful. It was something new. This was how she died. She was 11 years old. Of course my Dad, they couldn't convert him to the Catholic belief. He had his own religion. He never got along with the priests and the nuns. So when that happened, he wrote to

Ottawa - that used to be the head spokesmen for Chief of Counsellors - and reported everything. The only thing they did was change all the staff. Different nuns and priests but it was the same thing. Being a Catholic, they wouldn't accept me living out of school. We weren't suppose to go to a school out on the reserve. So, they wouldn't take us there either. I couldn't go to any other school, because you had to go to the denomination that you were, Catholic. Anyway, I stayed at home. When this came along when the war broke out, I thought that I should get out and educate myself. There were no schools on the reserve, there were on the outside. In the army we were able to take different courses, like math, English. They didn't give me an official grade, but you were better equipped.

AFTER THE ARMY

When I left the Army, I took a hairdressing course. I worked at that for 22 years in Ottawa. We came back here in 1969. They had upgrading at that time, so I took upgrading from Grade 5 to Grade 10. So I past that and applied for University. At that time you could get in with Grade 10. This is my 4th

year at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College so I should be finished soon.

I will be teaching Cree.

THE INDIAN ACT AND THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

The Indian Department didn't put things out. They were allotted land on the reserves which was already their land. When I first got my status back - they thought that we were all going back to the reserve. Actually, it is my people against each other. This is bad. It took a year and a half to get my status back and it cost me a lot of money. I got it back about 1983. They wouldn't put anything out here, the Indian Department. Everything was kept under wraps because the people on the reserve didn't want us back. This is what it was like. They were told not to let any news out. They were going to put out money for that to the Indian Department, to extend the housing and all that. Myself, I wouldn't go back. There isn't anything there if you are not farming.

LOOKING BACK

Well, I was more mature, I think, the way I looked at things. I always felt that there was no such thing as "can't". Anyone can do what they want to do. I just came off the reserve, into the army. The people that weren't in the army - we experienced a bit of discrimination. What made up for it was the girls that I was in the army with. They used to take up for us. When I was discharged from the army, the women weren't able to get certain jobs at that time. So, when I was discharged in Kingston, I wanted to join the police force, but you couldn't. They said that the best thing I could do was to work as a guard in some institution, like a penitentiary, but I didn't want to take that.

A lot of the women went overseas like the men. I suppose they took different courses and brought up their education. Before I joined the army and I was at home - you see they outlawed our religion - so we used to go to this secluded place for the sun dance. I remember my mother telling us when I was just 9 or 10 years old, not to leave the buggy. She would say that if I saw a mountie coming to come and let her know.

The ceremonies were really something. They would they would go out and cut different poles, a certain kind of pole. They would put the main pole in the middle. The people that wanted to dance, it wasn't dancing really, just up and down - they would keep their eyes on the sun, and they were fasting at the same time. This went on for a few days.

I remember from seven to eight years old. We didn't go to school until we were nine years old. This is something awful. If you weren't at the school at the time it opened, the mountie would go and pick these children up. It was really bad.