



My Thoughts,
My Life:

Institutionalized Racism in Canada

DENEACE GREEN

My Thoughts, My Life:

Institutionalized Racism in Canada



Deneace Green

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Part I

Racism in the Canadian Armed Forces

— Chapter 1 —

Bars at the Gate

Today is Friday, April 09, 2004, and the time is 10:01 a.m. Since I have been thinking about death for the past few days, and since I have no intention of leaving without telling my story, I believe this is as good a time as any to tell you what happened to me—considering that it is a hell of a lot easier to tell my story than it is to sue for damages. I am going to tell you about my experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces.

It started in late 1996. I was working at Coca-Cola Bottling Limited as a customer service representative. The job was boring and debilitating. It was damaging the nerves in my ears, wrists, fingers—which hurt night and day—and my back and neck were in constant pain. I endured it because . . . that is a whole other story.

Every morning and evening, to and from work, I saw the same poster in the bus: The Canadian Armed Forces, “There is no life like it.” It appeared to offer a life of adventure and pride, conducted with a sense of urgency, and the acceptance of all Canadians. I considered

how my job was affecting my mental state as well as my physical well-being. I noted the phone number for the recruiting office and made the call. I was scheduled for testing in February 1997. No one told me that since I was a university graduate, I could apply as an officer candidate. When I found out, I called the recruiting office to have my application changed from non-commissioned status to commissioned officer status. The woman on the phone told me that my marks fell just a few points below the cut-off mark for an officer. She refused to tell me my test score, and she would not tell me the cut-off score for a commissioned officer candidate. This was my introduction to the lies and deception of the Canadian Armed Forces. Had I realized how much worse the lies would get, I would have withdrawn my application at that point.

Months passed. I came to a point where, physically, I could no longer bear working at Coca-Cola; so, I left and was out of work. As a recent graduate (or so I was told), it was almost impossible to find meaningful work that related to my studies in sociology and political science. I focused on finding employment with social service agencies; however, employers would often say to me, "You don't have experience."

I took on five volunteer jobs at the same time, to get experience: as a *group facilitator* and *telephone counselor* for the North York Women's Centre; at my Member of Parliament's office; in the City of North York, Ward 4 Councillor's campaign; and as a telephone solicitor at the Liberal Party's office. During this time, I called the Canadian Armed Forces Recruiting three or four times to find out what was happening with my application. The answer each time was the same, "We'll call you once your application has been processed." I wondered what had happened to the sense of urgency that the

poster had suggested and, with some urgency of my own, I looked at jobs with Corrections Canada, Canada Customs, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). My intention was to secure a position as a corrections, customs or police officer. None of these positions required a degree, neither did they require a college diploma; however, since I had earned an Honours Law Enforcement college diploma prior to attending university, I thought the government agencies would welcome me upon passing their entrance exam. In July 1997, I attended an RCMP information seminar. August 1997, I wrote the entrance exam. In September 1997, I received a letter from the RCMP informing me that I passed the test.

Later in September, someone from the Canadian Armed Forces called me to attend an interview and physical testing. The interview came before the physical testing, and I was rather surprised to see that an American Petty-Officer was conducting the interview. He was a Black man, friendly yet professional, in his very early thirties. The White man who conducted the physical testing was not as friendly. He, too, was young—maybe late twenties. The way he treated me was a precursor of what was to come: His demeanour was cold and his words critical; I counted one more sit-up than he had counted. Then, he added, “If your heart rate was slightly higher, you would not be able to join [the army].” He refused to reveal the reading of my heart rate to me. When the testing was over, an army personnel immediately told me that I had passed both the interview and the physical components. This caused me to believe that I would start training within a week, at most. A month later, I called to find out when I could start training. The answer was, “We’ll call you once your application has been processed.” I kept up my job search and continued volunteering.

Late in October 1997, the executive director of the Ontario Networks of Employment Skills Training Projects (ONESTEP) called me for an interview. I did the interview on a Friday and by the time I got home, there was a phone message stating that I could start working on the Monday. *I need to mention that because of traffic, I was ten minutes late for that interview; yet, I was offered the job as Membership Services Coordinator. I should also mention that Lloyd Davis, my "husband," had made a concerted effort to get me to the interview as quickly as he could maneuver the car through downtown traffic. It was a one-year contract position, but I felt that it was my first real job. The Conference Coordinator, Lisa, and the Executive Director interviewed me. I mention Lisa because she later became an unexpected source of support for me.*

On the Wednesday of my first week on the job, I checked my answering machine messages from a phone booth during my lunch break and there was a message from the Canadian Armed Forces. They wanted me to start picking up the gear for basic training on Thursday, the very next day. I was to be an administrative clerk for 25 Medical Company. No one in the military asked me what job I wanted to do; they just looked at my test score and decided to make me an administrative clerk. Truth be told, I never thought of a soldier as someone behind a desk doing paperwork. I applied with the intention to do what "soldiers" do—train to fight. According to the voice mail, the process would commence at 6:00 p.m. and should take about an hour. I had just started a job but, after all, I had put much more time and energy into the army. *One of my weaknesses is that I don't know when to quit, except for intimate relationships which I tend to quit before giving them a real opportunity to take root—that, too, is another story.*

— Chapter 2 —

Getting My Gear

I arrived at the military base, Moss Park Armoury in Toronto, about 5:45 p.m. At ten o'clock, I was still there filling in paperwork and listening to why joining the army was such a wonderful decision. At the end of the glamour stories, the group of new recruits—mostly university and college students—was told to report again the next Thursday at 6:00 p.m., to pick up gear. Just about all the other recruits for this company were there to be medics of some sort while aspiring to become doctors.

The next Thursday, I did as I was told; however, I got only a few pieces of gear. There was an ice storm in Quebec, and most of the reserve gear and troops were sent to help deal with the natural disaster. Our group was told that we would be finished by 8:00 p.m. At ten o'clock, we were still there.

This night, I really took notice of two teenage Pakistani boys because they were the only ones whose parents came to our first orientation and now they were back,

paying as much attention to the speakers and the paperwork as though they were the ones joining the military. They were tired, but proud of their boys and made themselves very visible. It was obvious that the boys were doing what the father would have liked to be doing himself. The smile on this father's face gave him the look of youth; his years seemed to drop away, so that he looked very much the age of his older son. The younger brother was smart, but his older brother did not seem to possess the same level of intellectual ability.

Throughout basic training, the younger one always tried to help the older one without making him feel at all inferior. The older one failed at just about everything, but he was allowed to complete the course because of the presence of his parents. No, the parents did not follow the recruits into the fields for basic training, but they made themselves quite visible in the first few sessions conducted at the armouries. Furthermore, each time they dropped off the boys for training or picked them up, one could see and feel their excitement for their offsprings' participation in the Canadian Armed Forces. I felt sorry for the older brother. I thought that his parents put excessive pressure on him, that he was there because his parents wanted the status back in Pakistan of having their son in the Canadian Armed Forces. It seemed to me that it was the ultimate case of living vicariously through one's children. In fact, the older brother had failed out of York University and was to 'transfer' to a college the next year. Usually, the disgrace of failing out of university would cause someone in that culture to commit suicide (or at least think very strongly of it), but he was now a member of the Canadian Armed Forces. Therefore, everything else was secondary.

At the end of the evening, we recruits were told to go to Fort York Armoury the coming Tuesday evening to

get the rest of our gear. The stated objective was for us, recruits, to be fully geared for the next meeting. I went to get my gear, but the personnel at the supply shop turned me away because they had sent more equipment to Quebec to alleviate the effects of the ice storm.

The third Thursday of our induction started out no differently from the first—more paper work and listening to propaganda—except that, by now, several of the recruits had become frustrated and returned their partial gear. Some did not bother to leave properly; they just threw the gear down and walked out. One recruit, upon throwing his gear down, told a warrant officer to go f—k himself. This recruit's display of aggression was in response to the tone the officer used when the recruit said he wanted out. I should have left, too. But again, I didn't know when to quit.

This was the first night of some basic military drills. I am almost embarrassed to tell you that our trainers had me running back and forth in the gym in my high heel shoes and shin-length, pleated skirt. You see, after my regular day job, I went directly to the armoury thinking that we would be exposed to more classroom talk on theories, history, and specialized areas of the Canadian Armed Forces.

We indeed heard theory; however, I got the sense that no one really knew what to do with recruits lacking military gear. Thus, as warm up for drills, two corporals lined up the recruits at one end of the gym and told them to run to the other end. One corporal ran alongside us. When we got to the opposite end of the gym, the corporal who ran with us ordered us to run back to the end at which we started. He stayed put. The two corporals, at each end of the gym, had us running back and forth for a good ten minutes.

Had it not been for a few of the male recruits wearing their business attire, I would have felt that I really messed

up this time. Oddly enough, everyone kept looking at my shoes as though I should have known better than to be wearing heels or watching for what they perceived as the inevitable fall. The obvious question was, why not just take them off? The answer was that a corporal, without saying it in such plain language, informed me that the health and safety issues my bare feet posed to others outweighed the risk of injury to myself. The next question: What about taking off the shoes but leaving your knee high stockings on? Answer: Neither the army nor I was willing to risk my running around in nylons on a slippery gymnasium floor. I was quite relieved when we were ordered to stop running and, instead, to start marching—even though it meant that my first experience of marching in the military was in high heel shoes and a shin-length skirt. To begin the march, we were divided into three groups of about fifteen recruits and one corporal to each group. The corporal ordered us to walk behind him and swing our arms as he was swinging his, position our heads as he positioned his, and move our feet in unison with his. I felt like I was in Grade Two again, playing “Simon Says,” except that we were saying, “left, right, left, right, left, right. . . .” The bottom line was this: The government was paying the recruits to be present from 6:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.; the repetition in military propaganda had grown stale after the first session; the recruits had to “earn” their wage instead of sitting around waiting for the clock to strike 9:30 p.m.; safety was secondary to the government’s payment of \$7.50 per hour, per recruit.

At the end of this night, the group was told to report to Denison Armouries on Friday (the next day) for training. I still had not been issued any military clothing, so a corporal told me to wear gym clothing. The problem was that the only gym-type clothing I had was a pink track suit.

— Chapter 3 —

Weekend 1: Late November 1997

Drills, Drills, Drills and More Drills

Our group of approximately fifty recruits assembled and was divided into three roughly equal sections, and named accordingly: One Section, Two Section and Three Section. I was in One Section; and by the luck of this selection process, I was now with the people with whom I would be doing the rest of my training.

Approximately half of the recruits were wearing proper military attire. I was in my pink track suit among everyone else with their deep-green attire or some other dark colour. Even though I had not much choice in the matter, it was a big mistake because I was immediately made a target; every second question or reference was made to "Green." The name was easy to remember, and my pink clothing made the situation worse: a Black woman named Green in pink clothes. It could have been

a human moment, recognizing that we were all there together in spite of the deficiencies of military management of gear and clothing, but nobody relaxed. Instead, the trainers targeted me as if it was my fault. A warrant officer, Warrant Ross, tried to help me out the next day (Saturday) by lending me his green overalls; but by then it was too late—all the trainers knew “Green” and enjoyed the feeling they got exploiting my unfortunate situation.

The weekend consisted of drills, drills, drills and more drills: drills on proper line formation; drills on how to march; drills on how to turn and when to turn; drills on how to salute; drills on how to come to attention; drills on how to carry your weapon, which was a rifle; drills on how and when to be at ease; drills on how to step in and out of line formation. . . .

Corporal DeGroot felt that he had to give someone a chit, and guess who got it? I think it was for improper line formation. I signed the chit, even though I had the right not to do so. I signed because the situation was new to me. Ultimately, chits are allocated to show one’s imperfections; they are negative statements written about recruits to make it easy to show why certain recruits are not suitable to be the Number One Candidate—not suitable to graduate at the top of the class. I knew that my signing pleased DeGroot, because he wrote in his daily report that I had a “good attitude.” These reports were read to the recruit at some point during the weekend. It appeared that Corporal DeGroot and Corporal Ludwig were going to be One Section’s direct supervisors; they were going to provide the bulk of the actual training.

Actual training meant doing the following: getting up at 6:00 a.m.; using a half hour for ablutions in a bathroom that was shared with about fifteen other females (luckily, some did not feel the need to shower); get-