

Mary Greeyes-Reid (1920-2011)



Greeyes-Reid and service in WWII

Mary Greeyes-Reid was born on November 14, 1920 in Saskatchewan

Mary Greeyes-Reid was the first female First Nations member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. She was part of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, just north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and was the subject of a famous photo taken in 1942 (below).

In June 1942, following the footsteps of her brother who had already enlisted in military service, she traveled to Saskatoon to enlist as well. As the sergeant told her of her acceptance, she became the first Native American woman to join the Canadian armed forces as a member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. Although she was the subject of a

famous photograph meant to increase recruitment into the military, she would find that she was discriminated against by fellow Canadians, barred from regular barracks and constrained to menial jobs such as laundering or cooking, due to her ethnicity.

The Famous Photo



The title for the photograph—still found in the Library and Archives Canada—says, "Mary Greeyes being blessed by her native Chief prior to leaving for service in the CWAC"

In late June 1942, within the first month of her military career, several men from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police visited the Piapot reserve, looking to stage a propaganda photograph with Greeyes. They ran into WW1 veteran and councillor Harry Ball, who agreed to partake in this effort in exchange of 20 dollars.

Pieces of clothing and accessories that might contain Native American flare were borrowed from nearby homes to make Ball appear to be a chief or someone of importance. The resulting photograph, depicting a Native American chief bestowing blessing upon the patriotic and uniformed Greeyes, quickly became a famous photograph in Canada after first being published in the Regina Leader-Post.

Quickly, the photograph was published all across the British Empire. Somewhere along the way, it gained the official caption of "Unidentified Indian princess getting blessing from her chief and father to go fight in the war".

It would be many decades before Melanie Fahlman Reid, Greyeyes' daughter-in-law, could successfully persuade Library and Archives Canada to include Greyeyes' name in the caption; LAC's current caption for the photograph would still contain the "chief" description, however.

Despite the newly gained fame, Greyeyes was kept in menial positions. She was shipped out to southern England, United Kingdom to wash laundry and then to cook. As one of the few Native Americans in service in the region, she was often brought to events where diversity was needed, thus she was often seen in newspapers, and she was given the opportunity to meet the Queen Mother, King George VI, and Princess Elizabeth. After the war, Greyeyes returned to Canada in 1946. She passed away in 2011. She was also known by her post-marriage last name of Greyeyes-Reid.