

Over There and Back

By Iva Gwendolyn Good Voice Flute

First let me introduce myself formally. My name is Iva Gwendolyn Good Voice Flute. I am an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and have lived on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation most of my life. And my experiences in the military are what I made them during and after my honorable discharge.

My journey began traveling south and returning to the north with these memories accompanying the experience. "Airman Good Voice Flute, why is your name so long?" "Sir, I am a Native American and this is my last and no sir, I cannot make my last name shorter." I dreaded mealtime because it seemed like I had to report to the table for the training instructors when one of them read my name tag. "How do you say your last name?" I held my breath every time. The letters were smaller with no spaces between the words.

Perhaps I should've said my last name in my Lakota language (Ta Sina Ho Wašté) instead with a mischievous chuckle to myself. Inquiries were made for the most part out of sheer curiosity. There were comments stated in a negative manner that alluded to my last name being too long because it had "too many words to say" as some so "eloquently" put it. I had reached a moment in time that perhaps I was the only Native American tribal enrolled member who identified as one who was in the US Air Force at that time.

When we received our base assignment, I was in disbelief yet overjoyed as I silently exclaimed "South Dakota I am on my way home to you!" What I found so confoundingly interesting was that at Ellsworth AFB was where I met other Native Americans of different tribes. To this day one of my best friends is a member of the Crow Nation of Montana. I accepted that we are all airmen, but it was lonely that, in my personal opinion, only a Native American can understand. I loved my military experience and will always be forever grateful for the opportunities it provided for me.

After my honorable discharge I returned home and had to transition to a life I had before. The differences were evident in the changes that I became more independent, more assertive, more vocal and more resilient with a visible display to adapt and improvise. Strengths that I had been born with were further enhanced because of my military experience. Our culture and traditions complement the military culture and traditions which made it less difficult for my assimilation into the military.

I was welcomed home without the fanfare as was given to male veterans. There are women veterans in my family who only now their names were brought to my attention. Their names came to life. I wondered that if I hadn't enlisted, would their military history have been mentioned? I was unaware of their service because I had no one to relate to. The answer quite simply was "We don't talk about the women because their military service was something that a lot of women don't do." Military service was out of the ordinary, much less acknowledged.

A goal soon developed that became a vision to help make women more visible with their military service. A few of us formed an American Legion Post that was comprised of a full membership of Lakota Women Veterans. It was the first chartered membership of its design. What we accomplished by obtaining this distinction was unheard of. Why did we do this? To bring recognition to women who have served and continue to serve today. It took courage but we had a purpose and we finished what we started.

A reflection of past events remembered when I took the negative comments and statements made about my cultural heritage, I seized the opportunity to educate the non-natives about who we are. There are a lot of stereotypes and misconceptions about us that we need to correct and clarify. I thought of myself to be an ambassador of sorts which I took very seriously. I was never ashamed of my culture and never allowed anyone to "chop up" my last name to be with less words.

My culture prohibits me from talking about myself because this responsibility is for our family to share our accolades. But I have made an exception because I have a story because of my experiences not only as a woman military veteran but as a Native American Lakota woman who consciously chose to undertake a great responsibility. I fulfilled my duties that many choose not to.

I finish with here is my story over and back. I have come full circle in life. I carry my military veteran status with distinction, with a humble pride that sets us apart from everyone else. The US Air Force has taught me that equality does matter.

In closing I dedicate my story in memory of my mom Lillian Grace Tobacco., whose love, tenacity, support and encouragement made me who I am today. Hetchetu Skto. "This is how it is."