

Student charges forces with racism

by Gina Hanlon

During Officer Cadet Junaid Shaikh's first week at Field Artillery School in Gagetown, New Brunswick, he was pointed out by an ununiformed man who said "Holy Jeez, we have a Paki here." The man turned out to be his Duty Sergeant, and the statement was indicative of what Shaikh could expect during his summer in the Canadian Armed Forces.

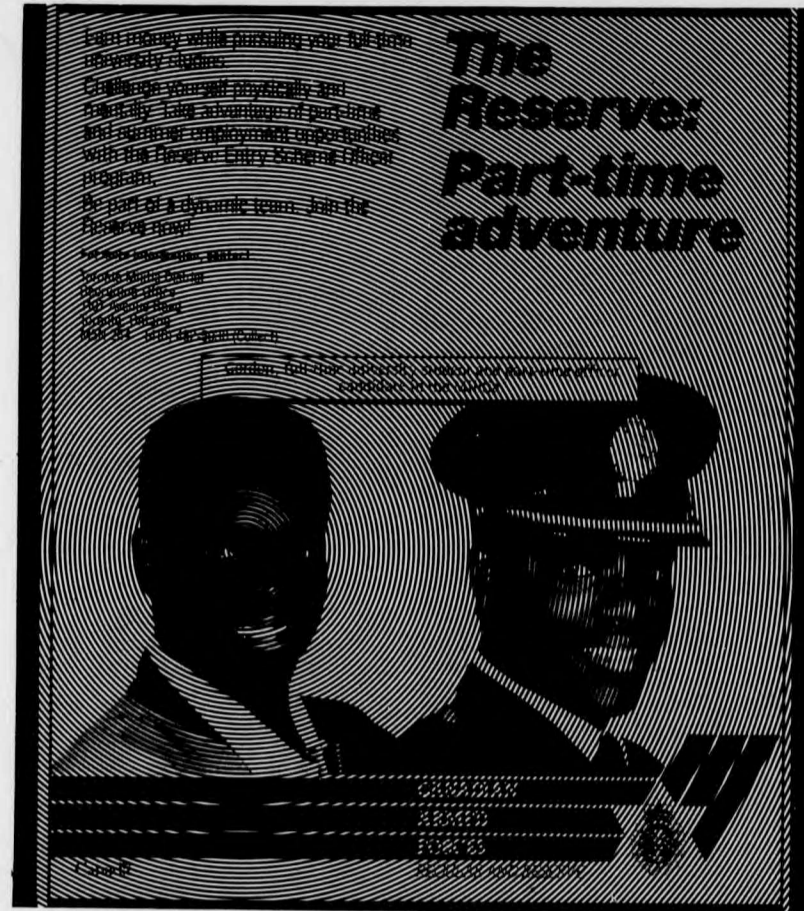
During one military exercise, Shaikh's instructor pulled Shaikh aside. The instructor said he had been to Turkey and "felt like killing the [Muslim] guy in Cyprus who called people to pray all day."

feature

Another instructor repeatedly asked him if he prayed five times a day and if he believed in Christ.

Shaikh, a McMaster University student, has filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission, citing racial discrimination, including instructors' racial comments and their continuous ridiculing of Muslim dietary laws.

Despite a stated allergy to pork, as well as a religious taboo, Shaikh



Canadian Armed Forces representatives say recruitment posters like these, which feature Blacks and women in uniform, are the closest thing they've got to an affirmative action program.

was continually ridiculed about his refusal to eat pork whenever it appeared on the menu.

Eleven students on the course have witnessed for Shaikh, risking reprisal from their course instructors. Other students, however, were

not as supportive.

Shaikh, as a Muslim, does not drink. In the first month of the course, he spoke to other students about their stashing and drinking alcohol in their room, as well as their drunken behaviour, which

included self-inflicted pain, vomiting, and defecating inside the sleeping area. As a result, Shaikh quickly earned the unpopular label of "course blade," which counted against him when he was assessed on peer interaction.

Two weeks before the end of the course and a day before a major exam, Shaikh was given final warning and returned to his unit because of inadequate performance.

According to Shaikh, the reasoning given was vague, contradictory, and sometimes simply wrong. Shaikh's final warning memo states "Shaikh showed little interest and concern for the course... lowering his peers by a negative attitude toward training," which directly contradicted the encouraging verbal statements and weekly evaluations given to Shaikh by his instructors throughout the course.

Shaikh wrote his own redress of grievance. He repeatedly asked for the military legal assistance he was formally entitled to. None was forthcoming. Following his request to interview other students, Shaikh was ordered to stay away from the main building.

After a twelve-hour military investigation, it was decided that no racial prejudice had been directed at Shaikh by either staff or students, but that there had been "administrative errors" and on this basis, Shaikh was reinstated.

Shaikh, however, wants more. He wants his commissioned status,

and an admission of wrongdoing from the Canadian Armed Forces.

He also says he wants the forces to become more representative of the diversity of Canadian society.

"The [Canadian] military has never, never adopted a policy of going out and seeking racial minorities. The military is not a true representative of Canadians," Shaikh stated flatly. "I felt very robbed at the end. I had brought out nine allegations of racism, and the eye was turned the other way."

Neither the Canadian Armed Forces nor the Human Rights Commission are ready to make a statement on Shaikh's case as it is still under investigation by both organizations.

But on the more general question of race relations in the forces, Lieutenant Caroline Bernais of the Director General of Information's office in Ottawa said there are no affirmative action programs in the Canadian Armed Forces and the CAF doesn't fall under any employment equity laws.

Bernais cited the presence of women and Blacks in recruitment posters as a positive step taken by the Forces. She also listed two optional training courses; one on cultural awareness and an "adaptation" course geared to help Northern Canadian recruits deal with ethnic diversity.

However, she said the Forces are not prepared to use affirmative action policies to make the military more hospitable to minorities.

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