Stacey Fritz gives new meaning to the term ‘fieldwork.’

In order to study the legacy of a system of Cold War-era arctic radar stations, the EPSCoR-funded University of Alaska Fairbanks anthropology student needed to see some of the line for herself. So she and a partner spent the summer of 2008 sailing and paddling a 19-foot expedition canoe 750 miles from Fort MacPherson in Canada’s Northwest Territories to Barrow, Alaska, inspecting radar sites and interviewing local residents along the way.

“I couldn’t choose one place, because I didn’t think it would do justice to the story,” Fritz said. “So I thought just maybe doing a comparison of sites in the western Arctic would be doable … the only way to do that is by boat.”

The Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line was built from 1954-7 to provide early detection of Soviet bombers coming over the North Pole. The 63 sites, which stretch from Greenland to the Aleutians, are now mostly shuttered, though the line still operates as a largely automated system.

Fritz’s research interest is the psychological and economic repercussions the DEW line had on the Alaska Natives and First Nations peoples of the arctic coast. In particular, she’s examining how the stations have affected local people’s perceptions of the military. Fritz called the DEW Line a rare case in the modern world in which people had military ideas and values presented to them after growing up without preconceived notions on the subject.

Fritz and partner Ryan Tinsley put in their twin-sailed Kruger Cruiser canoe – named the “Tundra Daisy,” after a nickname for the ubiquitous empty 55-gallon drums that dot the arctic tundra – at the Peel River on July 6, 2008 and paddled north into the MacKenzie River Delta before bearing west along the coast. The pair stuck close to shore and stopped regularly to examine DEW Line sites and conduct interviews with local residents along the way. They finished in Barrow on September 6.

Fritz said she found every site had its own unique history, depending on where it was situated and how staffers interacted with the local population. She said the legacy of the DEW Line is profound but difficult to encapsulate: It brought people health care, employment, modern airfields, building material and excitement, as well as pollutants like PCBs and lead paint, jobs that served to undermine subsistence lifestyles, and a huge supply of alcohol. “There’s so much good about it, and so much bad about it,” she said. “It’s very, very complex.”

Fritz was able to conduct many interviews along the way. While she’s unwilling to draw any conclusions at the moment, she said her preliminary findings point to a generational break in opinion: older people, who remember WWII and may have worked at DEW Line sites, are more supportive of the military than younger people who are more aware of modern warfare and of DEW Line sites’ tendency to leach contaminants.

Fritz headed back to the arctic coast in 2009 for further study, this time by airplane. But the 2008 Alaska EPSCoR graduate fellow said her decision to conduct her initial research in a more unorthodox manner proved invaluable.

“The advantages of traveling by boat through the environment were just inestimable,” she said. “It was huge. I think people trusted us far more because we did that...I wasn’t a sole researcher who showed up on a plane and dropped in to ask somebody weird questions.”

Alaska EPSCoR is funded through NSF award #EPS-0701898 & the State of Alaska