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Chair

Mr. Stephen Fuhr

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• (1610)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Stephen Fuhr (Kelowna—Lake Country, Lib.)): We are going to get started here. I appreciate your patience and apologize for our tardiness. We had votes that lasted a long time. We have a quorum, and we have all parties present, so I am happy to proceed.

Thank you for coming today to talk to us about your appointment as senior associate deputy minister of national defence. Congratulations. I understand that you have some comments. Following your comments, members of the committee would like to ask you some questions.

You have the floor.

Ms. Jody Thomas (Senior Associate Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence): Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I very much appreciate the opportunity to be here and to introduce myself to all of you as the new senior associate deputy minister of national defence.

This is day 17. Over the past three weeks, I've had the feeling of being on new but familiar ground. I am the daughter of an admiral. My father retired as vice-chief of the defence staff. My husband served in the regular and the reserve force, and is a medically released commander in the navy. My brother-in-law is a serving major-general.

[Translation]

I am also a commissioned officer. I joined the naval reserve as a high school student, through what was then known as the summer youth employment program.

[English]

I was in one of the first cohorts of women in the naval reserve to be allowed to have a so-called hard sea trade, and I chose to be a diesel mechanic. I was not a fantastic diesel mechanic.

Then, upon entering university, I applied to, and was accepted into, a three-year officer training program. When I graduated, I trained officer cadets to be maritime surface and subsurface officers, the officers who command, coordinate, and control military maritime operations and who help inform the design, procurement, and evaluation of ships, submarines, and naval systems.

[Translation]

I learned a lot from that experience. Indeed, I attribute much of my resilience to my time in the navy.

[English]

My ability to see where we are, where we need to be, and how to get there safely is unequivocally a gift from my time in the navy. Both have served me incredibly well in the various management leadership roles I've held in the public sector.

My first foray into the public sector was as chief of business planning and administration for the Atlantic region of what was then Public Works and Government Services Canada. I then moved to the other side of the country, where my husband was posted, and became the business manager of the Esquimalt graving dock on the west coast. It was a busy place. As the only open-access, multi-user facility on the west coast of the Americas, and the largest deep-sea shipbuilding and repair facility on Canada's Pacific coast, we welcomed big ships from around the world, from cruise ships and general cargo vessels to B.C. ferries and Royal Canadian Navy warships.

Turning my attention away from the water for a few years, I joined Passport Canada in 1995. There, I held several positions, including manager of the Victoria passport office, director of security operations, and director general of security. Most notably, however, I took on the role of chief operating officer at the height of the 2007 passport crisis.

That year, new international travel policies left Canadians who wanted to fly to the United States scrambling to get passports. The department was woefully unprepared for the surge in demand. In January alone, we received 23,000 more applications a day than we did the month before. By May, we had a backlog of almost 200,000 applications. My job was to turn it all around.

In the months that followed, I undertook an immense restructuring of the services in each province and territory. We put in place new processes. We built a new centre for printing passports, and we hired new personnel. Two years later, the then-Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser, tabled a status report. In it, she said she was "pleased at the extensive action it [Passport Canada] has taken to fix the problems". I was pleased too, and it remains one of the highlights of my career.

[Translation]

Another highlight was my tenure as the commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard.

[English]

I worked every single day with the armed forces in that job, and I am also honoured to have been the first woman to lead the Canadian Coast Guard.

Obviously, there are many differences between the two institutions, yet they share a unique operational component. As the head of the government's civilian fleet, I oversaw an organization that every single day saves 15 lives, responds to 27 search and rescue cases, manages the movements of 1,233 vessels, carries out 11 fisheries patrols, supports 8 scientific surveys and 3 hydrographic missions, surveys 3.5 kilometres of channel bottom, and contributes to the work of numerous other government departments.

I was, and continue to be, incredibly proud of the work of the Canadian Coast Guard's 5,000 employees.

On a personal level, I am also proud that during my two years at the helm I was able to document the case for increased funding for the Coast Guard. I was able to make the organization more relevant to communities across the country. My team and I were able to show Canadians just how extraordinary this organization is, even as we streamlined our operations, renewed our fleet, and explored how we could better deliver our range of essential and critical services.

Another significant challenge I faced at the Coast Guard was managing the psychological impact of operations. A particularly difficult time occurred while I was deputy commissioner of operations. As many of you may remember, a Coast Guard helicopter crashed in the Arctic four years ago, killing all three people on board.

● (1615)

The incident affected everyone in the agency, and it really underscored for me the importance of ensuring both the mental and the physical well-being of our employees, many of whom face difficult situations on the job and see the worst possible scenarios at work, and some of whom deal with difficult situations at home, as well.

It's why I am now the champion of mental health at the Department of National Defence. I know the pain of people who have lost colleagues on an operation. I've seen the devastation of suicide on family and loved ones, and I can attest to how initiatives like a local one in this city, Do it For Daron, can really make a difference in people's lives.

My primary responsibility, however, is to help ensure that the Department of National Defence can tackle the four big challenges it faces. First, is its huge implementation agenda; second, is the quick and complete application of the new defence policy when it's launched; third, is the exacting, judicious, and strategic use of Canadian tax dollars; and finally, we need to further close the seam between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada.

I feel well-positioned to help do that. I understand the structure of the department and the Canadian Armed Forces. I have a lot of experience balancing service delivery and security, and I have great internal advisers who can give, and have given, me a solid footing on the issues.

I look forward to taking those issues on, and building a department that serves soldiers, sailors, air personnel, military families, and Canadians across the country.

Thank you for your time, and I'd be pleased to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you for your comments, and for your years of public service in a multitude of different capacities.

I'm going to give the first question to Mark Gerretsen.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you for coming to see us today.

In your remarks you said, "My ability to see where we are, where we need to be, and how to get there safely is unequivocally a gift from my time in the navy." So where are we, and where do we need to go?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Certainly, that was an approach I used when I was in the Coast Guard. Right now, we are focused on delivering the services that are on your plate and your agenda for the upcoming year. Where we need to be is how we, in the Coast Guard, implemented a number of major initiatives, the most recent one being the oceans protection plan. Within the defence environment, it's going to be defence renewal, and the defence policy review when it is launched. What we're focusing on within the Department of Defence right now is how we ensure that the day-to-day tasks get done, as we move major initiatives forward.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: You also mentioned how to get there safely. Can you talk about that, in particular any experiences you may have had that would help to qualify the fact that you can do that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Safely has a number of facets to it. When I was in the military, it was, of course, about keeping the ship and crew safe. In an organization like the Coast Guard, it was ensuring, as we took on different and new tasks, that the training, infrastructure, and vessels were there for people, and that we could move forward with new initiatives without impacting either our staff or, again, what we were delivering day-to-day. The same is exactly true within the Department of Defence.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: We've had a lot of discussions in particular about the role of our Coast Guard versus similar roles that coast guards of other countries are taking on, like the United States, for example. One of the things that appears to be quite different between our Coast Guard and those of other countries is the fact that ours is not armed. What do you think of that?

Ms. Jody Thomas: It's a very interesting question, and thank you for it. It's one we are asked a lot in the Coast Guard. I'm not there any longer, but it's certainly something I was frequently asked when I was commissioner. The interesting thing about coast guards is that there are as many different models of coast guards as there are coast guards. The navy tends to be a navy is a navy, and they are all very similar in their function, structure, and mandate.

The coast guards range. The U.S. coast guard is one extreme. It is very much like a navy. In fact, many people consider it to be the fifth largest navy in the world. The Canadian Coast Guard bridges a gap between it and, for example, Her Majesty's coast guard in the United Kingdom, where they don't have vessels. They manage ship movement, they coordinate search and rescue, but they don't actually respond. We're in the middle between those two.

We do have two vessels that are armed. The *Cygnus* and *Cowley* are armed for the purposes of fisheries patrols. Our large ships, the icebreakers, are fitted for weapons but not with weapons.

There is opportunity to look at the role and function of the Coast Guard. There is more of a need for, perhaps, a constabulary authority than for a military authority for the Coast Guard. That's a bigger gap in terms of what's happening on the water in Canada's 200 mile limit.

• (1620)

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Your experience with the Coast Guard definitely brings an interesting element, especially as it relates to that particular discussion we've been dancing around a lot because it comes up inadvertently in other conversations.

I appreciate that answer, but I'm trying to determine whether you think the model we have is the right model in terms of our defence, when we talk about defending Canada—

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think our model—

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Sorry. I'm asking specifically about the fact that our ships might be designed or be ready to be equipped with weapons, but they're not.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think that the actual fitting of weapons on a ship is the smallest part of the problem and the smallest part of the challenge, if you were to change the function of the Coast Guard. It is a civilian agency. It doesn't have a culture across the organization of military training, rules of engagement, and those kinds of things that are critical to a military organization, so that you know what to do when you are confronted with a threat.

I think the Coast Guard plays a critical role on the water. It partners with the armed forces, the RCMP, and CBSA on a number of fronts in terms of the safety, security, and sovereignty of Canada.

Certainly, the Coast Guard has a large presence in the Arctic. There are six icebreakers in the Arctic every year doing a number of things, from search and rescue, to environmental response, and icebreaking for resupply. It is also a huge sovereignty presence. Those red and white ships mean something up there.

In terms of what is required today, I think that the Coast Guard is the right model. I don't think models are static though, and I think you always have to be looking at what the country needs and where it's best placed to deliver that service from. I think there's a time where you may want a more active role from the Coast Guard, but for today, I think the model works.

Mr. Mark Gerretsen: Thank you. I appreciate that.

If I have any time left, I'll share it with Ms. Alleslev.

The Chair: You have a minute and 20 seconds for a question and a response.

Ms. Leona Alleslev (Aurora—Oak Ridges—Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thank you again for everything you've done. It's exciting to have you in this new position.

To open, I have an interesting question. I'd like to understand what you believe the roles of parliamentarians are, and the defence committee in particular, in their relationship with the Department of National Defence and the ministry.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think the roles of parliamentarians are quite clear in a democracy. Your roles are to represent constituents' issues in the House of Commons and ensure that democracy remains safe in this country.

In terms of the committee, I have a lot of experience with the fisheries committee having been with the Coast Guard. Your roles are to challenge decisions that are made, to ask questions, and ensure that you, and therefore Canadians, understand what's going on in the department. You can then assess how we're operating, whether we're efficient and effective in the use of public funds, whether we're good stewards of public funds, and whether we're exercising our responsibilities as implementers of government policy appropriately. I think the roles are broad and critical.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: In terms of your candidacy—

The Chair: That's your time.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: I'm going to give the floor over to Mr. Paul-Hus.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon.

In your opening statement, you mentioned your brother-in-law, a serving major-general.

Who is your brother-in-law?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: He is in Colorado Springs. He is a major-general.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Who?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Chris Coates....

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Very good. Thank you.

You also mentioned the efforts needed to bridge the gap between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada. The transfer is problematic.

Do you already have a solution you could propose to us today?

• (1625)

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I can't say that today. No, I don't have a solution. I've been with the Department of National Defence now for 17 days. I would say that 10 of those days have been spent on that issue.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: You mention it in your notes, so it's an important issue for you.

Do you not already have a potential solution in mind? If not, I imagine you intend to seek out solutions in an effort to fix the problem. Is that correct?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm certainly going to try to find solutions. It's a complex issue. I don't think it would be appropriate for me to say after only 17 days that I have the solution that the two departments have been working on for quite some time.

I've spoken to Deputy Minister Natynczyk about the work we're going to do together. I've met with the minister's chief of staff and had briefings on a number of the issues. I'm working very closely with the acting vice-chief of the defence staff and chief military personnel on the range of issues that need to be looked at because there is no single thing. I think there are a number of issues that have to be looked at and knitted together to ensure that the transition, as the chief of the defence staff would say, from recruitment to grave, essentially, is full-service, complete, and seamless.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Very good.

You've had quite a career, holding a variety of positions. You used to be a member of the Canadian Forces. You were also the commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard.

How do you, as senior associate deputy minister of national defence, see the role of the ombudsman for the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces and that of the veterans ombudsman? What do you think their roles are? Do they serve an important role?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you for the question.

I think the role of the ombudsman is critical. There has to be a route for employees and CAF members to bring forward problems and concerns that they have.

I've read now, in the time I've been there, several of his reports. I think they're very useful. It's a data point for the minister to make decisions. They are data points for the chief of the defence staff and the deputy minister to form programs, and he provides an invaluable service. I think, yes, the two ombudsmen are really essential to decision-making.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Do you think they should really be able to operate independently from the department, to make it easier for them to do their job?

[English]

Ms. Jody Thomas: I know that [Technical difficulty—Editor] today in particular. I don't think that there are any impediments to the ombudsman's independence at all. The FAA, the Financial Administration Act, affects everybody who works in government. There are controls on everybody's budget to ensure that it's spent appropriately, but he has never had travel turned down. He has never

had interference in a study of his, because there is a reporting relationship for the budget, and he has delegated authorities. He is able to spend his money, his budget, as he sees fit within the FAA. I don't think there's an impediment to his independence at all.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: About two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you.

Congratulations on your appointment. It's nice seeing you in your new role.

What rank were you in the navy?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I was very junior. I was a lieutenant.

Mr. James Bezan: Are you still a reservist?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm not a reservist. I still hold a commission, but between a full-time job, a husband at sea, and two babies, something had to go.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay. I was concerned that, if you did get called up, that would be a conflict of interest now with your position as a senior manager within national defence.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think, if I were still serving, it's something that I would have to step away from in this current job.

Mr. James Bezan: You said that one of the main jobs that you have right now is rolling out the new defence policy. When are you expecting that to be finalized and presented to Canadians?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't know the date, so I can't comment on that. My job, as the senior associate, is the implementation of major initiatives. This would be one of them. We're starting to look at how we would do that, but I don't have a date.

Mr. James Bezan: Other than defence policy, what are the other major initiatives that you have in your file right now and sitting on the desk that you're now working on?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'll be working on the procurement file, specifically the national shipbuilding strategy; the defence renewal process to find savings within the department and reallocate from lower to higher priorities; the Veterans Affairs file; and I also will be responsible for the science, technology, and innovation file within Defence.

● (1630)

Mr. James Bezan: On the Veterans Affairs file, we were talking just now about the ombudsman and Mr. Walbourne's interest in having more independence through direct legislation. He also offered some great ideas on how to help with the transition of medically released members over to Veterans Affairs.

Have you had a chance to review his reports and see about having those recommendations implemented? They seemed to me very straightforward in recommending that the surgeon general make a determination on injury attributed to service and then getting the proper pensions and benefits in place.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you. I absolutely have read the report and I find it very interesting.

I'm meeting with VAC officials starting next week. Deputy minister Natynczyk set that up for me. We have to do a line by line of what has been recommended there, what's in the chief of military personnel's plan for that transition, and the total recruitment to the end of service plan that has been laid out within the forces to see what aligns.

I haven't seen every piece of information put into one matrix yet. That's what we need to do to see where there are overlaps, where we're recommending the exact same things but using different language, just to ensure that all the bases are covered. That work is to come, but it's just starting now for me. I haven't had all the inputs from everybody within the forces yet on that particular file.

Mr. James Bezan: I just request that you keep it people-centric.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, absolutely.

The Chair: Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today. Congratulations on your appointment. I'm always happy to see somebody who has spent a lot of time in my riding.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm from Victoria.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Exactly. Having somebody who has spent time at the graving dock and who understands the relationship among the shipyards, the graving dock, and the serving base, I think would be very useful. But I have some questions about what exactly your job is.

I believe you're well qualified for it. But when you look at the the org chart, you see that the deputy minister is served by one senior associate deputy minister, one associate deputy minister, five assistant deputy ministers who report directly, plus four additional assistant deputy ministers who report to both the vice-chief of the defence staff, which I believe is their reporting relationship, or the chief of the defence staff and to the deputy minister. That's a lot of cooks.

You've said that your responsibilities as a senior associate are implementation of major initiatives. Is that to provide overall supervision? It doesn't seem to have a line responsibility, if you like. A lot of other ADMs here seem to have very specific line responsibilities. Can you tell me a little more about what that means, to be responsible for implementation?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Associate deputy ministers in most departments are two in a box. You shadow the deputy. You do whatever the deputy assigns to you. Defence is a massive department so the deputy minister and I have gone through ADMs, branches within the department, and particular files. The ADM materiel, for example, is going to report directly to me. I will have line authority, day-to-day authority, over certain ADMs in the department and then a broader implementation role for major initiatives within the department. I do that on behalf of the deputy minister.

Mr. Randall Garrison: So who will report directly to you?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I should have that piece of paper with me.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I know you're new in the position but I think it's very important in terms of those initiatives....

Ms. Jody Thomas: I have the ADM materiel. That includes procurement, science and technology, human resources, civilian human resources. I think that's it for the direct reports. Then I'll be working with the vice chief on a number of things where he has the role as the chief operating officer of the department essentially. I'll be working with him to help implement a number of initiatives.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Okay.

When you said that one of the things is the judicious and strategic use of tax dollars, one of the biggest concerns I hear from the base in my own riding is that there is still the same pattern that's occurred for the last 10 years of being asked to do more and more with fewer real dollars. While there have been some modest increases in the budget they haven't kept up with what we might call "military inflation", which is a bit higher. We saw the example of the chief of the defence staff saying that we're going to stop non-essential work. Although in Defence I often wonder what that is. I doubt we do much non-essential work. But how is the military going to keep up this increased pace of operations overseas with fewer real dollars to spend?

• (1635)

Ms. Jody Thomas: The defence renewal, our policy renewal, of course will be an aspect of that when it's implemented, hopefully.

Mr. Randall Garrison: But it usually adds rather than subtracts.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Hopefully stable funding for the forces will come with that going into the future. In doing more with less and getting rid of lower priority initiatives, I think it's incumbent upon us, as stewards of the department, to constantly review what's being done. I think so much is done because we've always done something that way. We've always funded a certain initiative. We don't evaluate the effectiveness or the efficiency or the need for that initiative any longer. They've done a lot of work in the department of defence to look at just those things, but it can always be done. The private sector model can apply when you look at your bottom 20% every year of what you spend your funding on and ensure that it's still required and reallocate internally to higher priority items. I had to do it in Coast Guard and at Passport Canada. I think it's just part of stewardship of funds.

Mr. Randall Garrison: I hear an increasing concern that sometimes this means deferring training and maintenance, putting things farther down the line, which eventually impairs our ability to do things. That's the concern I hear from people on the ground; that they're always being asked to put off this and put off that, and eventually they won't be able to do their jobs without it.

Ms. Jody Thomas: That was certainly true in the Coast Guard. As the operating budget was reduced, we had to keep vessels at sea, and so training was reduced and maintenance became regulatory maintenance. There was no preventive maintenance within the fleet or in our shore-based infrastructure, which was massive. I don't have the details on Defence yet, but it is a trend across government. As operating dollars are reduced, you take away from some of those easier-to-defer expenditures in order to keep the front line going. That is part of what we're looking at.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Eventually that does impair the front line.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, it does. It was starting to in the Coast Guard, with aging icebreakers, for example.

The Chair: Ms. Alleslev.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Thank you very much. I'm interested in what you see as the three big challenges for defence procurement, because that's going to be a lot of fun.

Ms. Jody Thomas: It is. The big challenge is getting it right. I think that the Department of Defence, and Coast Guard as well, have made huge strides in trying to get it right.

I think that starts with understanding what your requirements truly are. What do you need that piece of equipment to do? Why do you need it to do that? How do you ensure that you're buying the right piece of equipment?

It then depends on having the industrial capability. In the shipbuilding context, that means having shipyards that are available, modern, and able to build ships.

You also need an understanding of the cost of what you're trying to procure—the budgeting, costing aspect of things is important. That's been a big problem for departments, and I think huge strides have been made there.

Then, I think, it's having the right oversight so that you don't have too much. You don't want to be overly burdened with red tape, but you want to know how the money is being spent and how the procurement is proceeding.

I think there are four challenges rather than three, but I think it's improving.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: What kind of system of performance metrics are you using to evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency and, of course, improvement in the procurement system?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I'm just getting into the details of what's being used with Defence. I can give you the Coast Guard example—it's very similar.

We use third-party metrics on the efficiency of shipyards. We have a significant amount of oversight. We ask, for example, what should the level of productivity be for every hour expended in the yard to ensure that we're going to get the ships on time and within budget?

We monitor the productivity. We meet as an oversight committee, on shipbuilding in particular, monthly, at the deputy minister level. As you're aware, there's a cabinet committee that looks at defence procurement.

So that's third-party oversight. There's internal management in the yards, watching what's going on. We have very close relationships with the shipyards, which didn't exist in the past. We're in the yard, managing, measuring what they're doing, and speaking to them, having a very open dialogue if things are not going well.

• (1640)

Ms. Leona Alleslev: That speaks to the performance of, essentially, the contractor. It doesn't necessarily speak to the performance of the overall procurement process and output, of which the subcontractor or the execution arm is only one element.

Do you have a feel for the global performance metrics? How do we ensure at the end of the day that the military is achieving the capability it deserves and needs within the budget and timelines that have been specified? How do we ensure that we're achieving Canada's goals in the defence industry, technology transfer, and those other kinds of things? I'm talking about all the things wrapped up in procurement. What kind of procurement-modernization performance metrics are you envisioning on that front?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Within the Department of Defence, I've had two briefings on what's being done to ensure value for money, performance of procurement, performance of the equipment that's in the system already to ensure that maintenance is continuing to be done, that the equipment is available and ready for the forces to use. They have quite sophisticated tools now to measure what's in refit, what's available, and what's not available for the commanders of the army, air force, and Royal Canadian Navy in order to ensure readiness.

I'm not yet ready to comment on the broader military procurement context, the industrial capability writ large, the technology transfer—as you talk about—and innovation. In six months, potentially I will be. It's a massive undertaking. ISED is very engaged. Industrial technical benefits are a huge element of any procurement. All large procurement has to ensure that there is a return to Canada of both knowledge and investment. That is a major driver of procurement, and it seems to be functioning very well. When we get briefed on what's going on with, for example, the construction of the offshore fisheries science vessel or the Arctic offshore patrol vessels that are being built in Halifax, we see the investment across Canada through subcontracts. You can see the financial benefit already. As for the technical benefit and the knowledge transfer, it's a nascent industry and it's going to grow.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Fantastic.

Can you share some information around in-service support and what kind of emphasis might be placed on that, and whether or not in the acquisition process you're also evaluating the design for life cycle as opposed to just the design for design and worrying about in-service support later?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Defence has changed their approach, as I think you're aware. Both the costing and the design cycle have to include in-service support for all major procurements so that you don't end up with a situation where you're just doing regulatory and minimal maintenance so you can keep equipment operating.

Again, it's something that I have more to learn about, but I do know that there are three lines of maintenance done on armed forces ships, navy ships: first, second, and third. The first line is done by the crew, the second line within the bases themselves at the fleet maintenance facilities, and the third line by industry. It's an integrated approach ensuring that the vessels and any equipment can be kept operating and functional for as long as possible.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Around performance metrics, I know you're probably not into it, but again I would like to know about performance-based contracting and how you would rate the department in terms of where we're at with performance-based contracting for in-service support contracts.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't have any detail on that at this point.

Ms. Leona Alleslev: Fantastic.

I wish you all the best. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Spengemann.

Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Thomas, thanks for being here. Thank you for your service.

I'd like to start with a fairly broad question, but I want to connect it to the programs we're engaged in on the procurement side, such as the national shipbuilding strategy.

In your view, what do Canadians not know about the armed forces that they ought to know? Where are there some gaps in communication and awareness? Think as broadly as you see fit in answering that question. I'm trying to get to the point of what we need to do to better prepare ourselves for significant programs such as the national shipbuilding strategy and public support of those programs.

• (1645)

Ms. Jody Thomas: That's a hard question for me to answer because I grew up knowing about the Canadian Armed Forces. It's just a part of who I am as an individual.

I think the critical importance of the Canadian Armed Forces to who we are as a country isn't always well understood in some pockets. I think if you're a coastal community or you're near a large base, or you've been the recipient of humanitarian aid from the Canadian Armed Forces domestically, you understand. You see it. But I think that understanding the role of Canada in the world, the role the forces play as an arm of government policy and government intent, isn't well understood. But I think it's increasing. I think that the armed forces are appreciated by the Canadian public in a way they've never been since probably World War II. You see that trend of appreciation for the service of people, and I think it's quite extraordinary. I think that informing Canadians about the Canadian Armed Forces is a continual cycle. It doesn't stop and start. There is no campaign to inform. It's just constant communication about the role of the Canadian Armed Forces, overseas and domestically: search and rescue, community support, the economic benefit of having a base in a community, and then the work that's done overseas.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: What would be the one or two primary factors of your conclusion that things are changing in terms of public perception?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think back to when I was serving, and I think back to when my father was serving, and we didn't get thanks for our service on Remembrance Day when we were downtown. I went downtown every year. I've always gone, in uniform or not. When I was commissioner, the coast guard people would stop and thank me for my service. That's quite an extraordinary thing to have happen.

People see somebody in uniform in an airport, and they let them board first. That's an extraordinary thing to happen, and it wouldn't have happened 20 or 25 years ago. It's not anything that I can put my finger on. I think there is a general appreciation that is different from the way it used to be, and I think it's a really positive thing.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: That's helpful. Thank you for that.

To narrow it somewhat and talk a little bit about human resources in the Canadian Forces, what in your view is the current state in regard to Canadians who are considering the Canadian Forces as a career option, going all the way into the trades and science, technology, engineering, math, and leadership positions? I'm particularly interested in your thoughts on young women. How have things changed there, and what might be some gaps that you could address either directly through your new role or that the Canadian Forces could address more systematically?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Well, the first thing that's changed is that women are equals in the Canadian Armed Forces, and when I joined they were not. When I joined the armed forces, I was in this thing called the summer youth employment program. I won't have the numbers exactly right, but there were 150 seventeen- to nineteen-year-old kids, 60 or 70 of whom were invited to join the naval reserve at the end of the summer program. Ten per cent could be women. That's just the way it was. We were allowed to do—and it was the first year it was allowed—only three trades that could go to hard sea trades. That was considered quite adventurous. The naval reserve was doing it; the regular force wasn't; and the other branches of the reserves were not.

Things have changed significantly. The chief of the defence staff has been adamant that the number of women recruited is going to increase by 1% per year. They're working very hard at that. It's, again, about getting out to communities, to schools, and to youth groups to talk to youth about a career in the armed forces and helping them understand the range of careers that are ahead of them. It is not one career when you join the armed forces; it is a range of opportunities, a range of experiences, and it needs a range of people with different skill sets.

It's something I'm quite passionate about, and I think we need to get to young women, in particular, earlier, and not in grade 12 when they're looking at universities or what their career is going to be when they're finished high school. We have to start talking to kids when they're in grade 8 and in grade 10 when they're diverted and distracted by other things. Sitting in a classroom isn't necessarily what inspires them in the course of a day. We want to get to those kids and tell them about the opportunities that are out there for them.

I was that kid and I liked being on the job and learning things. I went to university and did all those kinds of things, but the opportunity to go to sea, to be in the forces, and to spend my summers having a completely different kind of workplace experience and one that has helped me throughout my career is, I think, an amazing story for the forces to tell and we just need to tell it more.

•(1650)

Mr. Sven Spengemann: In the same breath, that would be an answer to my first question also. People who have gone through the summer employment program or similar programs, not having chosen a permanent career, look at the Canadian Forces in a very different way than they would have prior to entry into those programs.

The Chair: I'm going to have to end it there. That's your five minutes. Thanks.

Mr. Sven Spengemann: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I'm going to hand the floor over to Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Senior Associate Deputy Minister, thank you for attending our meeting today.

In your opening remarks, you stated that your husband is a medically released commander in the navy. What was the length of time between the day he was released and the day he received his first pension payment?

Ms. Jody Thomas: He is a reserve officer, so it is a completely different situation for him in terms of benefits.

I will be completely honest with you that he told me there were some delays. I didn't pay as much attention as I should have, frankly. He did have some delays. He was getting a lump sum because he was a reserve officer and had already left the regular force and had transferred his pension into an RRSP.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay, so there was a lump sum. From the day he was out of the military until the day he received that lump sum, what length of time had passed?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I can't say. As I said, it was weeks or months. No, it was months.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Because he was medically released and the spouse of somebody who has a plan, there may be additional benefits to what he would receive in health benefits. If he were entitled to any expenses or benefits above and beyond related to his medical release, what length of time did it take for him to receive those?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Because he had a pre-existing condition, and it wasn't from military service, he wasn't getting any medical expenses paid for.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Very good. Thank you.

As the head of the Government of Canada's civilian fleet and the Coast Guard, you mention that you responded to approximately 27 search and rescue cases on a daily basis.

You've seen what the people who worked at the Coast Guard every day in saving lives were faced with. In your opinion, do you think there should be any mandatory requirement for smaller vessels to have some sort of EPIRB system in them so that if they go missing, or you get a distress signal, you at least have something to follow?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I absolutely believe that. It is something we advocate for within the Coast Guard. The office of boating safety belongs to Transport Canada, and that regulatory regime is in Transport Canada. As the search and rescue agency that was responsible for maritime search and rescue, anything that takes the

search out of the rescue is useful and, in some cases, critical to finding somebody alive.

The more we can do to ensure that people understand their responsibilities before they go out on a vessel, that they understand the rules and the practices of safe boating, and that they have the safety equipment on board, including EPIRBs, personal floatation devices, and immersion suits—depending on where you're going and the time of year—makes all the difference.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: On average, what proportion of the search and rescue time is spent on the search if you don't have a location?

Ms. Jody Thomas: There's no one answer to that question. It depends on the location of the search, how we were contacted, and the information we were given at the time. If somebody calls and says, "I'm having problems with my vessel and here's my location", it's easier.

We often get a call from a family member. They are 40 km, 50 km, 60 km, 70 km offshore, and we have to get to them. All those things affect the time. Minutes matter in the ocean, and the more information we have, the easier it is. You can get a helicopter to somebody to lift them out of the water if you know the location.

•(1655)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Let's go to further closing the seam between the Canadian Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Canada. I'm going back to my initial question.

We're told that one of the Queen's regulations stipulates that an individual who is releasing from the military cannot apply for veterans benefits until they cease to be a serving member of the forces.

Are you familiar with that regulation?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I don't know if that's a regulation, but I know it is the practice right now, in that the goal of that closing the seam work is to ensure that nobody is released from the armed forces until they are ready. That means, their benefits are in place, their family is stable, and they are emotionally and physically ready to leave.

If it's a Queen's regulation, a QR&O, I'll find out, but it is the practice right now. It is the critical element in that closing the seam work that's being done.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave it there. We're out of time, unfortunately.

I'm going to give the floor over to Mr. Whalen. Thanks for coming today, and welcome to the defence committee.

You have the floor.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you for having me, Chair.

Thank you very much for coming, Ms. Thomas. It's very interesting. Your background seems ideally suited at this time when the defence staff is engaged in such a huge amount of procurement and revitalization in transitioning to a new policy.

From your background, I see that you were heavily involved with managing a change or crisis at the immigration department. We would like to avoid a further crisis in managing the change to a new strategic approach to defence, the new national defence policy.

What additional supports do you see being needed in the department to ensure that legacy protocols can continue to be managed while new processes and policies are being put into place?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you for the question.

I think what's critical, whenever you're implementing something new and you have to maintain either current operations or legacy systems, is overlap and backup. We can use any number of methods to implement something new. We can put a tiger team in place to write new policy and implement new program, but I think what's critical is not cutting off the people who are doing the legacy work from the forward-looking work.

In the defence department, just like in the Coast Guard, if we take a new approach to doing something, it's a transition from one to another. It's making sure that's seamless: people understand the training, that they are trained, they understand what's expected of them. I'll be working very closely with the vice-chief of the defence staff to do just that.

It depends on exactly what the defence policy review says—how much there's a pivot, or how much there's an expansion, or how much there's a change of what's being done.

Mr. Nick Whalen: I'm glad to see someone with some experience in change management in your roles. That's wonderful.

There's another sideline, and maybe this is following up on Mr. Spengemann's questions about increasing the opportunities for women in the military. It relates to the November 28, 2016 report from Statistics Canada that highlights that general sexualized behaviour in the workplace, discrimination “on the basis of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity”, etc., is much more prevalent—maybe six or seven times as prevalent—in the military as the general working population.

How do you oversee or are involved in ensuring that there's a change of culture and a new approach to weeding out sexualized violence within the Canadian military—certainly on the civilian side, where this was even more prevalent than on the regular forces side?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you for that question. It's an enormously important subject, and it's one that I know the chief of the defence staff, the deputy minister, and the minister are all taking extremely seriously.

I've had multiple meetings already with the Operation Honour team, and asked what they want my role to be. Certainly, it's a leadership role, and a policy role in ensuring the right policies are in place to keep women safe; that the right lines of communication are there to report violence and inappropriate behaviour; that we talk constantly to the men and women of the defence team, of the entire department, about what's appropriate and what's inappropriate. It becomes a very slow but steady culture change, in terms of expectation.

The chief of the defence staff has been quite adamant in saying that this had to stop. He's put in an enormous effort with the OP

honour team into ensuring that it does. You can't order something like that, though; you have to work with who is there. It's about leadership, ensuring that people have a safe environment, and working with the men and women in the forces to educate about what they absolutely should be saying no to in reporting, and, on the other side, of what is absolutely inappropriate behaviour.

● (1700)

Mr. Nick Whalen: Ms. Thomas, it's not clear from my review of the organization chart who is responsible on your team for helping to implement this agenda.

Should there be a dedicated person? Should that be set out in the org chart so it's clear who is responsible for implementing the agenda of the national defence team to weed out and change the culture against sexualized violence?

Ms. Jody Thomas: On the military side, with Operation Honour, Rear-Admiral Jennifer Bennett, who is probably familiar to you, is leading that initiative for the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mr. Nick Whalen: But on the Defence staff?

Ms. Jody Thomas: On the Defence staff side, I'm the ADM responsible for civilian HR, and I will be discussing that next week.

Mr. Nick Whalen: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: I'm going to give the first part to Cheryl, so she can finish her line of questioning.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: If the requirement to have left the forces is a practice as opposed to one of the Queen's regs, what is the obstacle to changing it so that people can have that seamless transition and not have to wait months and months for either a lump sum or their very first pension cheque?

Ms. Jody Thomas: As I said, I don't know if it is a regulation or a practice, so I will have to get back to you with what the exact process is. I know that making the application for veterans benefits and moving into the VAC care system out of the defence care system is what's being worked on now.

It is three weeks in for me, it's a very complex file, there are a number of elements to it, and I could not yet pronounce on what the problem is or how to fix it.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Do you see a reason why the surgeon general's office...? I ask because it is the military doctors who see and treat the people who often are medically releasing? They have the historic knowledge of why a person is medically releasing. Does it not make sense for them to be the ones who adjudicate as to whether or not they qualify for medical benefits through Veterans Affairs, rather than making them go before people who have no medical background whatsoever to fight for the very benefits that were promised to them should they get injured in the course of duty?

Ms. Jody Thomas: On its face, yes, what you're saying makes sense. I haven't spoken to the surgeon general about his position on that aspect of the transition yet. As I dig into it, those are the questions I'll be asking.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

Mr. James Bezan: I'll take it from there.

Ms. Thomas, you were talking about the different projects you're working on. It seems that you have a lot of people you're working with, or reporting to. You have the vice-chief of the defence staff you have to work with on the issue of personnel, human resources, and that side of it. You're working with the associate defence minister of materiel, Patrick Finn, on a national shipbuilding strategy.

Does it get a little confusing, or do you think everything will fall into place as things move along? Is it normal practice to have so many different people that you have to report to?

Ms. Jody Thomas: They report to me.

Mr. James Bezan: They report?

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes. Pat Finn, for example, will report to me. I'll work side by side with the vice-chief of the defence staff.

So no, it's not an unusual situation at my level of the hierarchy.

Mr. James Bezan: You're even above Pat, then.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes.

Mr. James Bezan: On national defence procurement and the shipbuilding strategy, we just finished wrapping up our hearings on naval readiness. We talked about shipbuilding. We had the main contractors here. We had Irving, Davie, and Seaspan here. The concerns are about the time it's taking to make the surface combatant decision on design, a possible lag between the AOPS coming off the production line, and then having to lay off people for 18 months, maybe two years, before we actually start the manufacturing and construction of the surface combatant.

Have you dived into yet how we will manage that hole and the loss of expertise, particularly at Irving in Halifax?

● (1705)

Ms. Jody Thomas: When I was commissioner of the Coast Guard, certainly I was part of the deputy minister governance committee that was looking at both shipyards, ensuring that there were no or minimal gaps between builds. The same situation is true in Vancouver shipyards between the offshore fishing science vessel and the offshore oceanographic science vessel.

There isn't a solution yet. The assistant deputy ministers of Public Services and Procurement Canada, Defence, Coast Guard, ISED, and Treasury Board are all very engaged in looking at what the options are. Can we advance work? In Vancouver it's easier because of the number of builds. Can they take in other commercial work in the interim? Can Irving build, as was in the paper the other day, an additional Arctic offshore patrol ship and potentially sell it to somebody?

The cost and benefit of every single option is being looked at now. I haven't seen the outcome of that work. They've been at it for a couple of months. It's big money we're talking about, with serious consequences to getting it wrong. So they don't have an outcome, but

it's certainly seizing the deputy minister community involved in shipbuilding.

The Chair: I'll give the floor over to Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here.

I'm very interested in the mental health of our men and women who serve. You are the champion of mental health at the Department of National Defence. Tell me a little bit about what you bring to the table. Do you see an opportunity here to change things, to think outside the box, or do you feel that this will mostly be status quo, maybe with a few tweaks?

Ms. Jody Thomas: I think there's a huge opportunity. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about this. It's something that I'm quite passionate about. I think there are huge opportunities to think outside the box. I think there are so many elements to the mental health issue that I can't put a bow around them and wrap them up, but ensuring that there's medical support for serving and released members is critical. It's easier when people are within the system than relying on the provincial health system. That's something we're looking at with Veterans Affairs and that team.

The critical element, and it doesn't matter whether you're a civilian or a kid in high school or a serving member of the armed forces, is reducing the stigma around having the discussion about how you're feeling. Mental health illnesses are no different from physical illnesses. We have to have that conversation with people.

I'm a passionate advocate for youth mental health in my private time. I support the Do It For Daron initiative. Luke Richardson was my daughter's hockey coach, so I've seen the devastation and the courage of a family affected by suicide. I think what they have highlighted in terms of reducing stigma—having conversations, giving people a safe space to express how they're feeling—is really critical. Then in the workplace, it's about teaching managers, supervisors, and commanding officers—again, it doesn't matter whether they are civilian or military—how to respond to that. Give people tools.

If somebody comes to work with a broken leg, we know how to deal with them. If somebody comes to work with a sore back and can't lift that day, we know how to deal with them. If somebody comes to work feeling depressed or having problems with anxiety or suicidal thoughts, we don't know how to deal with that because we haven't equipped our managers broadly enough.

I've been briefed by the team of very energetic people looking at mental health within the Department of National Defence. It's a tripartite approach. We have a bargaining agent lead, which I think is critical. We have a military lead, and we have a civilian senior manager lead—who would be me. We're not thinking inside the box. We will do anything we can to have this conversation. There are a lot of campaigns out there. Bell Let's Talk is one of them. CAF was very engaged with that last year. But there are other things out there, and it doesn't matter whether it's national or small, such as in a very small work group. Anything that gives people the opportunity to say, "I have a problem and here's how we're going to deal with it in the workspace", is important.

There isn't a pill and there isn't one solution that's going to work for everybody. So it's about understanding the range of problems and giving managers, uniformed or civilian, the knowledge, the training, the understanding, the compassion, all of those things, to deal with the problem.

• (1710)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you. That's encouraging. I get the sense that you could go on and on about that.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I really could.

Mr. Darren Fisher: We have a phrase that we use sometimes, "Nothing About Us Without Us". I would encourage you to reach out. Ten years ago, 12 years ago, 20 years ago, I think the culture was to keep it inside and lock it up. Now the culture's changing. I've seen it in my family. People are willing to speak and looking for

people to speak to on this. So I encourage you to reach out to those who suffer for suggestions.

On value for money and efficiencies, having only been 17 days into the job, I'm sure you haven't nailed down exactly what you want to do, but you're bringing a lot of experience to the table.

I speak to a lot of people who feel that their voices aren't heard. They have all kinds of ideas and suggestions for efficiencies and value for money and things that could be more streamlined and done in a better manner. I'm probably running out of time. I would encourage you to reach out to folks as well, to break down the ground level and take some of their suggestions. It probably is a great idea to go down to the ground level and ask those folks what they're thinking or what they would do if they were in your shoes.

Thank you.

Ms. Jody Thomas: Thank you.

The Chair: I think that's it for our questions.

We have committee business. I want to thank you for coming and speaking to us today. You have an impressive resumé, and after listening to you for an hour, I have every confidence that you'll do well. I wish you the best of luck in your position.

We will suspend.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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