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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I'd just like to mention that we returned from a successful trip across Canada. We started in Millbrook First Nation, Halifax, then the Six Nations reserve, and then Beauval and Victoria. We met over 60 veterans and their families. The weather was cold, but the trip was successful.

Today, we continue the study of the needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans.

We have two panels today. First, we have witnesses from Alberta and Saskatchewan in the first panel. We'd like to welcome Wallace J. Bona. He is president of the Aboriginal Veterans Society of Alberta. He is also the Alberta director for Aboriginal Veterans Autochtones. The Aboriginal Veterans Society of Alberta was founded by first nations, Métis, and non-status veterans in 1983. The society's mandate is to organize and unite all aboriginal veterans for advocacy and support for each other, and to facilitate activities such as the duties it undertakes for other organizations that call upon them for parade and honouring assistance.

Mr. Bona, we'll turn the floor over to you for 10 minutes, and then we'll go to questions. Thank you for coming here today to meet us.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona (President, Aboriginal Veterans Society of Alberta): It's a pleasure to be here, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee.

I'm new in my position. I was put in this position at the end of April. We perpetuate the memory of our aboriginal veterans. We also promote a federal government program, a youth development program, that is referred to as bold eagle. Bold eagle is for youths 16-29. The vehicle is six weeks of reserve basic training. It gives the young adults a leg-up. Since I've been on board, I've worked with the bold eagle program for about the past year. The past president got me involved, and I've assumed his position of bold eagle coordinator for Alberta.

I released from the military in 2008. They had a civilian, and I can't remember if he was with the Legion service office, or was a person hired for the transition process, but I remember going in and meeting with the gentleman....

Pardon me, I feel like I'm in the principal's office.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Darrell Samson: You're the principal. Let 'er rip.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Thank you.

He wanted to bring a point up. He said he noticed on my documentation that I identified as being from one of the indigenous groups. I said I was. He said I needed to be aware that to access benefits, now that I was going to be out of the service, there might be interdepartmental wars. Veterans Affairs would say, "He's status Indian, so that's your responsibility." Then Indian Affairs would come back and say, "No, because he's a veteran that's your responsibility."

I don't know what impact that's had on me. I know I have struggled since I left the service. It's hard going back to school, which was my intention. I had actually started university, but I was getting memory triggers from some of the material presented in classes, namely English. It was quite interesting. Who would have thought that a math question would invoke a trigger, and it did in one instance for me, so.... That's where I'm at.

There's another issue, since I got on board. I was talking with an elder a few weeks ago at a powwow, and he mentioned that there are actually aboriginal veterans living on the street in Edmonton. I did some checking, and there's an organization in Edmonton, Boyle Street, that deals mainly with the homeless, and I did point out that there are in fact aboriginal veterans there. I think, with the historical context of colonialism and where there's a high proportion of indigenous peoples in the bigger cities, that rings true.

I did some further checking, and I talked to the Royal Canadian Legion. They indicated that there were some aboriginal veterans who had approached the office trying to access benefits, and they were able to help them out to the extent they could. That's something I want to pursue further when I get back to Edmonton.

The issue is that on one level, we have an indigenous person, and then we have a person who served in the military. I can speak only for myself, but there's a bit of a matter of pride about coming forward and asking for help and stuff like that.

It's been very interesting since I assumed the position of presidency, so to speak. I'm definitely learning more and more. We are marginalized. We're a small demographic, and there's lots to find out there.

A week and a half ago I was up at Gift Lake for a job fair to promote the bold eagle program, and earlier this year we buried a World War II veteran out in Driftpile. I went to his grave, and there's still no marker on it. I don't know if it's a matter of money issues with the band or the family, but I think we'll be able to get Veterans Affairs or the Legion to help out with a suitable grave marker so people will know that, yes, this guy served in the army. Actually, from the stories I've been told, he landed in Normandy on D-Day.

I'm open to questions.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll begin our first round of six minutes with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you for your service, and thank you for coming today. We appreciate it.

As our chair just mentioned, we just finished a week-long tour across the country and we met with many first nations veterans. I think we would all agree that one of the things that was most powerful about it is how proud these veterans are of their service to Canada, and we appreciate that.

I'm wondering, just for the education of those of us here, where in Alberta your background is.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I presently live in Alberta. I was stationed with the military. I did about 10 days shy of 26 years, but I did a few postings to Alberta, so Alberta is home for me. I grew up in a military family. My father was in the army. He met Mom up in Churchill, and we moved away after I was about a year old, with the military life. It ended up that I joined the service.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: And you served with?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I was with REME, the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. I was a vehicle technician in the army.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You discharged voluntarily, or was it a medical discharge?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: It was a medical release, item 3b.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Do you feel comfortable sharing with us why that was?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Sure. I also did a stint as a paratrooper for about four years. In 2000, I was involved in a vehicle mishap over in Bosnia, and the next five years after that, with the military lifestyle, running with a pack on your back, boots, hard ground, sleeping on the cold ground, it was all cumulative. I was having a few issues before that with my back, but when you're young and you think you're fairly fit...

• (1115)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: One of the things that we as a committee have learned over the last two and half years is that initially there was not a lot of recognition for providing services for veterans, indigenous or not. Basically, people questioned why they were hurt. When you talk about being a paratrooper jumping out... The assumption now is that someone's jumping off a tank or parachuting continuously in their job, so there will be long-term degenerative changes to their spine, to their knees, etc.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Did you have any challenges with that when you dealt with services?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: You mean the culture?

Mr. Robert Kitchen: That's correct.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes. It was all about mission first. That's the nature of the training. The job comes first before yourself. In the Cold War, you always had to be ready and prepared, whether you were serving on a ship or on an air base or in the actual field units. It was always like that. Showing any form or any level of weakness was frowned upon. The idea was that you had to get the job done. It wasn't about you. There's nothing about being an individual in the army. It's all about teamwork and seeing it through.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You said you served in Bosnia, and I truly believe our soldiers who served in Bosnia are forgotten soldiers. They never get mentioned. People always talk about Yugoslavia. They talk about Afghanistan. They do not talk about Bosnia, unfortunately.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: It was the former Yugoslavia or Bosnia. I served in two areas on two different tours. On the first tour I served with the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and the second tour was with 1 Service Battalion. For the first tour we were stationed in Zgon, in country, and then for the second one, I was with the national support element.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You mentioned to us today that when you were releasing, they talked to you about challenges you might have with VAC and Indigenous Affairs. Do you recall whether, when you first signed up, they told you from the day you started what sorts of services might be available to you throughout your career? You mentioned today not necessarily knowing about the education benefits that might be there.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: No, I can't recall. It was the time of the Cold War. I don't know—maybe people were getting complacent. It had been going on for so many years.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Would you say that was consistent, not only for all veterans but also for indigenous veterans?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I'm not sure I understand the question.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: What I'm trying to get at is this. A lot of times we've said, in our meetings and the studies that we've done, that we feel that the information provided to our soldiers, once they enlist, should be told to them the moment they sign up. They should be continually reminded of the benefits and things they can access once they become a civilian.

I'm trying to find out whether that is something inherent within the system that you may be aware of. Is it something that maybe other veterans got that our indigenous veterans didn't get? Is there a disconnect between them?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I would say that everybody was treated the same.

Just by my appearance, I guess you could say that I don't appear indigenous, so I'm kind of caught between two worlds. You do hear different things. I remember from being in the service that up front they do tell you the things you're entitled to, but generally it's "Wait till you get out."

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina, you have six minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much, and thank you for your service.

Apparently, the first veteran you encountered was your father, right? He was a member of the military.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes. He served about 32 years with REME. He was a Korean War veteran also.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Do you recall any of the issues he confronted in transitioning out of the military?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: As I recall, he finished work on a Friday, and Monday morning he was working as a driver at Dundurn military camp. It seemed quite seamless.

A year before my father passed away, he was diagnosed with PTSD.

Mr. Bob Bratina: So there were no issues being talked about in the family—i.e., "We need this" or "Why can't we get that?"

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: No.

Mr. Bob Bratina: That's interesting.

In terms of your identity, when you were serving, did you identify and mingle with other first nations or aboriginal veterans, or was it even noticed? You mentioned something about that.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes, I mingled. At the time we got our treaty status back, in the nineties, that's when my grandmother was quite ill up in Churchill. As I recall, or from what my mom said, the hospital was saying, "Well, your grandmother obviously has to be a treaty Indian. Where is her card?" It ended up taking the family 10 years to prove the bloodline to the government so that they could get status back. Once my grandmother got her status re-established—and it wasn't Bill C-31—then we got our card.

I do remember getting my card and not wanting it.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Talk about that.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Well, I didn't see any advantage. I was so immersed in the military culture.

I was certainly aware that the ancestry was native, that's for sure. I grew up with bannock and tea. I thought every family grew up with bannock and tea. My mom was like, "If you don't want it, that's okay." My father was like, "Oh, no, you've got to have that card. It could help you out later in life." I ended up taking the card. Talking to my friends, I was like, "Hey, check it out. I have a status card." I don't know; mixed reactions to it over the years.

Mr. Bob Bratina: You mentioned the presence of aboriginal veterans on the street in Edmonton. Of course, in all of our discussions and testimony, we've heard about all veterans on the street, not particularly one or another. The veterans generally, we

understand, are not likely to identify on the street as a veteran. We actually have to seek them out and say to them, "You were a soldier. You served. You have benefits coming to you."

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes, the discussion with the Legion is very interesting. What was pointed out to me, it seems people who live on the street especially, because they have a military background, have their own clique or culture of how they help each other and stuff like that. I had also done some volunteer work with the OSISS program in Edmonton. A veteran was living on the street, but living near the base. From what I understand, it was what he knew. He felt comfortable around the military base, with the aboriginal veterans on the street. My strategy right now is to try to make a regular appearance at Boyle Street, and hopefully they will come forward.

We were able to get a Métis veteran, who was in a group home in Edmonton with not a very reputable standing, into the Kipnes Centre but that took two years.

• (1125)

Mr. Bob Bratina: You were new on the job in April?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes, it's a volunteer position.

Mr. Bob Bratina: I understand that. Were you surprised at the issues coming to you that you were having to deal with? Is there a good learning curve?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I'm still on that uphill learning curve, that's for sure. The main reason the Aboriginal Veterans Society of Alberta...has been the bold eagle program, but my vision is we need to reach out more to the veterans. There are a lot of younger aboriginal veterans out there. We also have a member who served in the U.S. armed forces and then did some time in the Canadian military also. I've met him.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, you have six minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you.

It's an honour to meet you, sir. Before I get started, since we're studying aboriginal veterans, I think it's appropriate to acknowledge that we are on the unceded territory of the Algonquin and Anishinaabe people. Like Mr. Ellis, I just travelled the country. I was in Korea with Mr. McColeman and Mr. Eyolfson and the minister where we had the chance to travel with veterans, including some aboriginal veterans. It was a great experience to better understand our veterans and see our veterans through the eyes of Korean people, and how much they appreciate the service. I'm sure the people in Bosnia feel the same about the service that you've done, sir, and thank you.

Also thank you for your voluntary work here, taking on this new role. It's very important that we have people like you doing that in serving our veterans.

You talked about obstacles first nations veterans face and the pride. Maybe you could elaborate some of those challenges, barriers, you might face that the Government of Canada might be able to help address in VAC, in serving our aboriginal veterans.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: From what I've seen, the lingering effects of colonialism are still quite evident today. I don't have a ready answer. We just try to reach out to these guys and channel them into certain areas where they can get some help. I know the first time I went on a reserve—I've been on a few reserves over the years—but some reserves around Edmonton I have to admit were a trigger for me. I thought I was back overseas.

Mr. Gord Johns: From my understanding, a lot of aboriginal veterans have suffered PTSD from service and also from the residential school system. We need to make sure we have culturally sensitive programs and outreach that can reach our veterans. In the United States, 30% of their caseworkers are former veterans, so they can connect with veterans when they have those challenges especially—

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I don't find that the case with Veterans Affairs here in Canada.

Mr. Gord Johns: No, it's not the case.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: It's very difficult dealing with a civilian who, as we say in the army, “never walked in our boots”.

Mr. Gord Johns: I imagine that's the case, and we're hearing that. We have great civilians working in VAC, and we also have veterans there to help understand those situations, especially when they're colleagues and comrades. Veterans want to serve. They've signed up to serve our nation, and I know many veterans would love to serve their comrades when they're having challenges.

Would it help aboriginal veterans? When we look at the population of aboriginals in the service, they represent just over 3%. Would it be appropriate to have that reflected in caseworker numbers so that we have aboriginal caseworkers to help serve the needs of aboriginal veterans when they need help?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: In my opinion, it would definitely help. I have a hard time connecting sometimes within the different indigenous groups. I feel like sometimes I'm caught between two worlds, really. I'll give you an example. I was invited to the elders group for the World Indigenous Games last year. We were sitting down for our gala dinner, and I was sitting with the elder who had invited a couple of us aboriginal veterans.

I sat down at the table, and they asked what the *moniyaw* was doing there. *Moniyaw* is Cree for “white man”. The elder indicated that I was a status Indian, and they upped the ante, saying, “Oh, you think you're better than us.” I was sitting there eating my food and there were comments like, “Oh, look at that. You use a napkin and you hold your knife and fork correctly.” I finished eating and I said, “Yes, you're right; my father is white. But you know who taught me table manners? My mom.” After that, it was good. No one gave me a hard time after that.

Sometimes when you go into the communities there's that resistance, and when I encounter it, it's a painful reminder of the historical context and the colonialism that's still very pervasive.

● (1130)

Mr. Gord Johns: With respect to homeless veterans, could you talk about how we can reach aboriginal homeless veterans? We heard from the communications director of the aboriginal veterans society of Canada that they did a survey and found that 6% of those living on the street in Montreal were aboriginal veterans. I think there are ways we can reach them, and if you could let us know how, that would be really helpful.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: That's something I'm trying to get a hold of.

I was talking with the people down on Boyle Street, just telling them that an aboriginal veteran showed up and that this might let them know it's okay to access some benefits. To be honest, I really don't know.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Bona. As Mr. Johns said, I was with him when he was with those Korean War veterans. It was a great experience to connect with these people who had the kinds of experiences your father did. It was quite an honour.

I've asked some veterans about this before. Although there are questions about what happens in the Canadian Armed Forces, there are programs in the forces that can affect how a veteran transitions. Was there any special training for indigenous members during an armed forces career that prepared them for these challenges and let them know that these services were available to them? Many of them go back to isolated areas when they transition. Were they told about the challenges they were going to have and how to address them? Was there any sort of training like that in the armed forces, specifically for indigenous members?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: In my time, no, definitely not. It certainly wasn't consistent. When you release from the service, the clerk gives you a questionnaire. In fact, my workplace was so poisonous that the medical officer and the psychologist had to pull me out and put me to work as a driver at the base hospital.

I will tell you that when I released, they gave me a questionnaire about my injuries and I said that I was also diagnosed with PTSD. Their reply was that it was not their problem, and to access Veterans Affairs. I don't know if it was because I identified as a status Indian, but that's the way I was treated.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: When you say it was a toxic workplace in the military, was this like....?

● (1135)

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Because I was diagnosed with PTSD, some things I had seen overseas were having an impact on my work performance. My marriage was suffering and I ended up going to see a psychologist; and it took him probably six months before he'd say, yes, I had all the classic symptoms of PTSD. I actually got to talk about things that had happened overseas. It was pretty rough.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Did the fact that you're indigenous contribute to this toxicity in the workplace? Do you feel there was any racism going on?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I think so, yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I'm very sorry to hear that. That is to our shame that this happens.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I remember another incident where, actually, I was in another unit and of course we say we don't have racism, that everybody is the same and that, but this was before I got my status back. It was on an exercise and we were doing a night navigation march. A member in our platoon, which was very large, had to find his grid coordinates in the pitch dark, and one of the directing staff had placed the marker and I remember the guys were saying that an, expletive, Indian doesn't know his way around in the dark—and it ended up that it was exactly where it was supposed to be.

I remember the same individual being in the duty centre. Soldiers get in trouble, and the army has different levels of correcting their training, and I remember these guys asking who the inspecting sergeant was. Well, it was Sergeant So-and-so, and they were saying, "Oh, shoot, we're in for a rough road tonight". The sergeant was a very professional soldier—actually, it was the same individual who was DS on the night nav—and he did his cursory inspection and said, "Okay, guys, grab your kit bags; we're going for a run", and they went for a five-mile run in the evening and they weren't happy about it. That's the same guy who can't find his way out in the dark, a very professional soldier.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Right.

Another issue you talked about was homeless veterans, and that really resonates with me, coming from Winnipeg. Of course, Winnipeg is the home of Tommy Prince.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Again, speaking of shame, it's to our collective shame that such a decorated hero lived his life on the streets in Winnipeg.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Do you find when you encounter...and we find this with homelessness in general—I worked in an emergency department, and we found that accessing services for homeless indigenous people was sometimes difficult because they felt that the services being offered weren't really appropriate for them. Would you say the same goes for homeless indigenous vets?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I don't know. I can't give you a straightforward answer, because I haven't met any of these guys. I do know of one individual, and I've now heard he is homeless, and I keep asking about him, but I've yet to see this guy. He pops up now and again through Facebook and social media. From what I understand, he has a lot of police charges going on, but I really don't know.

The Chair: Mr. Fraser, you have six minutes.

Mr. Colin Fraser (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Bona, thank you so much for being here, and thank you for your service to Canada. This study is an important one to try to identify some specific challenges

to indigenous veterans and how the government can do a better job supporting them.

One of the things—and I think it's been touched upon earlier—is the important role that indigenous veterans have played in serving our country and the fact that not as many Canadians know about that as maybe should; so education is going to play a key role not only within the indigenous community but in the society as a whole in order to teach people about the service and sacrifice of indigenous veterans and the role they've played in Canada. I think that will help in the reconciliation piece, as well, that this government is trying to forge stronger links with.

I'm wondering if there is something we could do as a veterans affairs committee to encourage the government to support educational efforts, as well as perhaps commemoration efforts specific to indigenous veterans, which you think would be important.

● (1140)

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: They still talk about Tommy Prince today and how the military treated him. You know, about the army not providing...at the time. They had to really insist on getting a burial party. When I talk about the bold eagle program, a lot of people say yes, it's good, but there's also the few who are like, no, my grandfather, my uncle, or my aunt served in the military and when they came back, they were enfranchised. They had to leave. They couldn't go back to their reserve. The Indian agent wouldn't give them their proper stipends or the benefits they were entitled to.

This is pervasive. If you want to help the veterans, you're going to be going up against that...the histories of how people were treated. When I see someone disadvantaged and on the street, to me, it's a painful reminder that the lingering effects of colonialism are still here and aren't going to go away soon.

I've heard that there's a memorial here in town. My intention is to go visit, but I also heard that it's not completed, so I'd like to find out for myself. Maybe that would be a good start, get the aboriginal war memorial completed.

Mr. Colin Fraser: I think that's a good point. It is an important symbol of the sacrifice that indigenous veterans have made for the country.

Just on the educational piece, I wonder if you could comment on the fact that, throughout our history as a country, there have been aboriginal veterans who have fought for Canada. They fought at Vimy Ridge in World War I, on the beaches of Normandy in World War II, throughout Korea, and through more modern-day conflicts.

Don't you think we need to do a better job, as a country, in telling our young people about the role that indigenous veterans have played in our military?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: It is important. I know there's a movement on in Alberta, within the school system—I was able to sit in on a meeting with the Minister of Education—where they want to address more military history in the curriculum. I've been approached by the military museum in Calgary, where they want to involve more aboriginal veterans to get more information about them.

I find that the issue is that people don't always want to talk about it. It only seems that the stories come out when I go out and promote the bold eagle program, or we attend funerals, or they see us dressed in our uniform, but generally, they keep very quiet about it.

I think that maybe the national aboriginal war memorial would be a good start, for sure.

Mr. Colin Fraser: As a committee, we've heard, throughout the various studies we've been conducting, how important not only outreach is to veterans, who maybe feel like they don't have confidence in the Veterans Affairs Department—

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: That's really nice of them.

Mr. Colin Fraser: —but also how important and critical it is to have peer support, from somebody who's been through these difficulties, who you trust and has that same knowledge and background.

From your perspective, is that true of indigenous veterans as well and is there any advantage in having an indigenous peer who's been through similar things with Veterans Affairs that would be helpful to a veteran transitioning from the military, for example?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I never grew up on a reserve. I was born in Churchill, so I guess you'd say I lived in the white man's world. I do know, from some of the members in our society and talking to people out in the different indigenous communities, that there's a strong connection with their communities. From what I understand, some have been successful, while others...you know, alcoholism, abject poverty, and various addictions.

I think it's going to be very hard because I know that, in Alberta, there are communities all over the place and in very remote areas. I can't see how you're going to get something like the OSISS program to go to reserves because a lot of reserves don't want them. They don't want the government there.

• (1145)

The Chair: Mr. Jeneroux, you have six minutes.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux (Edmonton Riverbend, CPC): Perfect. Thank you, Mr. Bona, for being here today and for your continued service to veterans and the aboriginal community.

I am from Edmonton, as well, and I want to hear your testimony and have the opportunity to ask you a few questions. I understand intimately all the references you are making to Boyle Street and Kipnes.

I was reading a report from the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network that says Veterans Affairs estimates there are 7,000 first nations vets who served in the First and Second World wars, and the Korean War. Other estimates we've seen are that around 12,000 indigenous men and women served. I wonder if you have any comments on the numbers.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: From what I have read, I would say those are conservative estimates. I'd also like to point out that there are indications that indigenous communities did volunteer way out of proportion to the mainstream during the different conflicts, that's for sure, and continue to do so today.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: If you don't have a number estimate, would you have a breakdown, perhaps, of men and women from that?

Would you have, percentage-wise, the number of men and women who served within the wars?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I couldn't give you those figures.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: I think APTN estimated it was 65% men, and I was just curious as to the breakdown that your organization would or wouldn't have. If you don't have that, that's fine.

You mentioned Boyle Street a number of times. Thank you for going there. It's a fantastic community organization in Edmonton. I'm curious, though, where else in Edmonton, and in Alberta, the Aboriginal Veterans Society of Alberta spends the time to connect with the veterans who are on the street, as you mentioned.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Right now, it has just been the Edmonton area. An elder approached me, and in a sense, I guess you could say, challenged me, saying, "There are aboriginal veterans on the street here in Edmonton; what are you going to do about it?"

I know it's going to take time, and it's something that I'm hoping I can guide my executive towards, because we do have to advocate for our own veterans.

I want to do a tour of the province to try to meet with our existing veterans who remain and see what their issues are. Perhaps the committee could come out to Alberta. We are veterans. There are a few of us out there.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: I come out to Alberta every weekend. I'd be happy to be there with you.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Okay.

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: We do have a number of legions, such as the Kingsway Legion, and I'm thinking even of the hospitals. Has there been much outreach from them to you, or you to them, in terms of connecting with the veterans?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: One legion there, the Kingsway Legion, gives us tremendous support, usually in the form of the recognition of being part of their colour party. As well, a couple of years ago I was able to carry the Aboriginal Veterans Society flag at a football game, so that was good. There is different stuff such as that.

Generally, though, we keep to ourselves. We're a small demographic. From my understanding and talking to a few, a lot of the individual members deal directly with Veterans Affairs. Generally, the treatment has been pretty good, but as you know, there will always be people who fall through the cracks. In my opinion, there's a historical context to people falling through the cracks. Colonialism is still pervasive.

• (1150)

Mr. Matt Jeneroux: Mr. Bona, I have only about a minute left, but you brought up the bold eagle program a number of times. I'm curious as to how else you promote that. It sounds as though you promote it at Boyle Street and other places.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I haven't promoted bold eagle at Boyle Street. That was something specific to aboriginal veterans being on the street.

We work a little bit in conjunction with the recruiting group in Alberta. They give us some support with brochures and that sort of thing, and then we also work—I shouldn't say hand in hand, but when we set up at job fairs, we'll set up with the RCMP, so generally if an individual wants to join the RCMP, we will say, "If you complete the bold eagle program and it's on your resumé, it helps us out". They will refer us, or they will say they were thinking about the bold eagle program but they really want to get into the RCMP and we say, "Talk to the RCMP first and maybe come back and talk to us".

The RCMP has been a stalwart supporter of the Aboriginal Veterans Society, very much so.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll end with Mr. Samson, for six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Mr. Bona, thank you very much for coming in today and for sharing your experiences and your opinions.

As I indicated earlier, Bona is indigenous but it's also Acadian as well, so many Acadians in my community in Cape Breton are French-speaking Bonas.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I've been told it was a young man from Normandy who got off the boat in Louisbourg in the 1700s. That's what I've been told.

Mr. Darrell Samson: It makes a lot of sense, that he was protecting, as a soldier, the fortress at Louisbourg, which is probably how it unfolded.

I want to thank you, of course, for your service as well.

I want to learn more. Throughout our trip last week there was a lot of information about a lot of indigenous people holding dual citizenship. Can you speak on that?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Dual citizenship in which...?

Mr. Darrell Samson: I mean Canadian and American.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: That goes back to the Jay Treaty, but if you look at the history of Canada and the territories—when I first moved out to Alberta I found it very interesting that there were a lot of Ojibwe from Ontario, and the story that was told to me was that as the settlers were moving west, the people were moving west also. Then there is north-south with the different groups of people where everybody is interrelated.

Mr. Darrell Samson: We also heard that in one region the American government would strongly encourage—and there was even conscription. They were telling indigenous people to either become soldiers or go to jail. Did you hear any of those stories?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: I've never heard those stories. I do understand the history with the United States. They went to war. Canada's approach was different, very much so, but the bottom line was that they were trying to assimilate people into a new society.

Mr. Darrell Samson: That's interesting.

We're throwing numbers around. Mr. Jeneroux—which is also a French Acadian name in case he wasn't aware.... I just thought I would share with him that that's the blood that is running through his

veins. That being said, don't fear: one-third of Quebeckers are of Acadian descent.

My colleague Mr. Fraser spoke about education. In the school system we have a lot of work to do. Even I was not aware of such a number of indigenous people working and becoming soldiers and protecting our countries and allowing us to be free. Those are powerful numbers and—unless I missed something, and I've been in the system for 30 years—the history books don't align very well with that.

• (1155)

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: No, they don't.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Can you expand on how the educational system in Alberta is trying to implement some programs to support or to share those experiences?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: The meeting with the Minister of Education was to bring more military history into the school curriculum. I've been told that sometimes the parents don't want to learn about military history. What I'm hopeful for are the military museums in Calgary where there's a big push to include more history on aboriginal veterans and give them their due recognition in the spirit of reconciliation.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I don't know if you had a chance, Mr. Bona, to go to the Canadian War Museum here. There's a good representation of the involvement of aboriginal peoples participating in the wars with Canadians.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: It's on my to-do list—probably tomorrow.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I don't know how much time I have, but the next question is extremely important to help us with regard to benefits.

How aware are you of the benefits that have been implemented in the last two and a half years for veterans in general? You spoke of the educational one. There's the caregiver benefit. There are all kinds of benefits.

How aware are you and your organization, and how are you transferring or communicating that information to your people?

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Generally, it's a lot of members, I do know, who deal directly with Veterans Affairs. I do have another meeting after this with AVA to find out exactly how we can disseminate that information better.

In my case, it seems like there are more doors opening, but I don't know if they know that I identify with one of the indigenous groups. They're throwing my file back and forth, so I can't tell you, but I know that it has been a slow process.

Mr. Darrell Samson: As a member of Parliament, I have to say that there's an investment of almost \$10 billion, and I'm having trouble sharing all that. We need to work together to get that message out.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Unfortunately, that ends our time today with you, Mr. Bona. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for all that you've done and continue to do for veterans in this country. From the bottom of my heart, keep up all your good work.

Thank you.

Mr. Wallace J. Bona: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll take a short break now to get our next panel in.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

The Chair: We will get the second half of the meeting started.

For the second part, we would like to welcome Veronica Morin from Saskatchewan to the panel. Good afternoon. By video conference from Saskatchewan, Philip Ledoux, vice-president, Prince Albert branch, Saskatchewan First Nations Veteran's Association.

We will start with Mr. Ledoux for 10 minutes, and then we will go from there.

The floor is yours, Mr. Ledoux. Thank you for taking time out of your day to testify.

Mr. Phillip Ledoux (Vice-President, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Phillip Ledoux. I'm a member of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veteran's Association.

I have here a brief history and vision statement for the first nations veterans. Our vision is to bring equality to all our SFNVA members and to close the gap in the quality of life between first nations and non-first nations veterans and their families. The mandate given to us by our membership is to monitor and participate with first nations' leaders to bring positive change to the quality of life for first nations veterans and their families; redress historical wrongdoing; promote unity; address common concerns; develop a collective voice for first nations veterans and their families; preserve the history of first nations' contributions to Canada's safety and well-being; and promote the warrior ethic among first nations people, especially youth.

One of the historical promises was that first nations veterans agreed to serve when first nations were under no obligation to defend the crown. First nations veterans exceeded our original agreement and continue to exceed our agreement to this day, while the crown continues to ignore our service and sacrifice.

For example, first nations veterans were promised they would receive one half section of land and \$2,300, while non-first nations veterans received one half section of land and \$6,000. In exchange for our service, veterans were provided lands that were already spoken for within treaty, while non-first nations veterans received prime unencumbered lands.

The current situation is that despite the ongoing mistreatment of first nations veterans, we continue to serve our communities without the support of the crown. First nations veterans are called upon to provide a wide variety of community services, such as speaking

engagements, honour guards, ceremonies, public engagements, reconciliation events, powwows, community events, to name only a few. We go when we are called even though in most cases it is at our own personal expense.

For many of us, these are our retirement years yet we cannot rest because there is so much work to do. Every year our numbers dwindle, and what will happen when we are no longer able to respond to the call?

The First Nations Veteran's Association submitted a proposal for support back in September 2017. Again, we have received no response from the crown. Because we are veterans and have lived through armed conflict, we see the wave of mental health needs facing our communities and a supportive response is required.

• (1210)

Mental health issues, specifically PTSD, remain a growing crisis not only for veterans, but first nations communities. The SFNVA is often called upon to provide mental health services, supports, and PTSD interventions, but we are entirely unfunded and the need is great. We need help and we call upon the government to honour the promises of the crown to provide support to meet the ever-growing needs of not only the veterans, but Saskatchewan first nations in addressing the crisis in mental health.

I would like to thank the standing committee for allowing me to speak about these critical issues.

Mr. Chairman, in December 2017 we submitted a proposal to Hon. Seamus O'Regan, Veterans Affairs Canada. It was a five-year projection for funding to support our veterans dealing with mental health, PTSD in its various forms. To date we have not even received a response. This is disheartening to us, but we continue our struggle.

Just this past year at the 100-year anniversary of Vimy Ridge, the Saskatchewan first nations veterans took it upon themselves to do a major fundraising. We were successful and we managed to send 20 first nations veterans to Vimy Ridge, for their 100-year anniversary, at our own expense. We never received five cents from the government. We raised approximately \$190,000 to send 20 veterans for 10 days to the battlefields of Vimy. Ms. Veronica Morin, the lady sitting there, was a part of that group.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you for your testimony. I also want to mention that Mr. Ledoux is a member of the Mistawasis First Nation, where he currently resides. Vice-president Ledoux also served with the 2nd Battalion, Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. In April 1965, he went to Cyprus with the United Nations' forces. He has seen special duties in Beirut, Lebanon, and has travelled extensively in the Middle East. Veteran Ledoux left the armed forces in 1966.

We'll move to Ms. Morin from Saskatchewan. Ms. Morin is the widow of her late husband who served in the U.S. military. You have 10 minutes.

Ms. Veronica Morin (As an Individual): Good morning. My name is Veronica Morin. I would first like to thank you for the opportunity to allow me to speak on behalf of myself, my family, and other widows and families like mine.

Through the Jay Treaty and section 289 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, my late husband, Sergeant Darby Morin, became a U.S. Army soldier in 2004. He was killed in action on August 22, 2009 during his deployment in Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum, New York.

We have two sons together, one of whom was born on Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. I made the choice to move back home to Saskatchewan where we were from in order to have family support, because we had no family stateside.

I would like to acknowledge that I am aware of the differences between the U.S. and Canadian care support systems for military families, and based on my experience of having both countries work together in bringing my husband home to be buried on our reserve, I assumed the Canadian support would carry on after the funeral. Both countries' military personnel were in attendance, including political delegates like our former premier of Saskatchewan, Brad Wall.

During my transition between the countries, I quickly realized I was completely alone in my search for support. Nobody, including my family members, knew how to help me with my needs. Due to my U.S. income, I was unable to obtain affordable child care. During my short stay in Fort Drum after my husband's passing, I took advantage of the on-post free child care so I could have a little time for myself to grieve and deal with the loads of paperwork.

My children were three years old and 18 months at the time of their dad's passing. My oldest was a daddy's boy and had to deal with his memories of his dad, and the youngest currently deals with the lack of his memories of his dad. I didn't expect free child care in Saskatchewan when I moved home, but hoped for access to benefits the Canadian military might offer their widows and their dependants, so I tried to apply for a subsidy for daycare. Because of my non-Canadian income, I did not qualify for this. This was also an issue with trying to obtain financing for a reliable vehicle and loans.

I began to deal with suicidal thoughts from feeling like a hopeless case and the stresses of not having the time I needed to deal with my grief, my physical health, and my own well-being. These issues started a cycle of anxiety and bouts of depression. I was not only grieving the loss of my husband, but also the loss of our military lifestyle, our support, and my self-identity without my husband.

What my sons and I needed was support specifically for military loss and our transition to civilian life in another country. This is not always a welcoming country to us as aboriginal people, and my sons are always still talking about wishing they had a place like TAPS, the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors stateside, where they could meet and relate with other kids who have had their parents pass away in the service as well.

I even went as far as reaching out to the Dundurn base and Hugh Cairns Armoury in Saskatoon for any support and inclusion they

might have to offer us. The response I always got was that they were not able to help me because we were a U.S. military family, and I never met anyone who understood my explanation of why my husband was a Canadian native fighting for the U.S. forces and how that was even possible.

As an indigenous family, I always saw us as equal to U.S. and Canadian Armed Forces, and I had a hard time accepting that this was not the case.

● (1220)

My sons and I have had to deal with more than just our losses. I also found myself now having to try to explain racism and discrimination to my sons according to their age levels. I had never imagined that my six-year-old would come home from school telling me how he tried to colour his hands with a beige crayon so that he could look like all the other kids in his school.

At the same time, my older son was beginning to display signs of depression. He stopped wanting to talk about his dad with me, which hurt because he was the only one who had the same memories as I did of our family life. What hurt more was seeing him put his head down and try to avoid recognizing his dad's memory at the Remembrance Day ceremony at the schools. I always made sure that the schools had a wreath for indigenous vets. My son acted ashamed to even mention that his dad was a native vet.

My husband was a very proud native soldier and always made it known that he was representing our country in our community of Big River reserve and our first nations people. He would have been so upset with me if I didn't man up to make sure his sons didn't lose their native pride.

I've been trying to keep up with the information provided to our country through the Veterans Affairs website. I had even sent an email last spring inquiring about why the names and profiles of my husband and other widows' husbands weren't listed—for example, army reservist Corporal Derek Smallboy from the Big River First Nation and army Private Kyle Whitehead from Pelican Lake First Nation.

I had also inquired about the vetfit program as a healthy outlet to physically work out my grief. The email correspondence stated that they would get back to me in 90 days with an update of a new gym they would work with. This email was sent prior to January 2018, and I've recently inquired about it again only to be told that they still didn't have any updated information for me. I have personally tried and made an honest effort to seek help for myself and to try to help anyone else who was going through what I was going through in dealing with the military.

I spend a lot of time with the widow of the late Kyle Whitehead still, and the widow of the late Derek Smallboy is actually my aunt. They always come to me thinking that I have information for them, and I don't. All I have is the information that I have found for myself, which I don't even know where to look for, but I'm constantly still trying.

Even for mental health support, I have tried so many different counsellors to try to meet my specific needs with my military loss. Eventually, I found a counsellor who had made an offer to research support suitable to my family's needs. I'm happy to announce that my counsellor of five years, the past five years, has informed me that she is moving to a new position for a new mental health program starting this week offered to military vets dealing with PTSD and mental health issues.

I just want to let everyone know that I'm so thankful for having the opportunity to come here, because with the last nine years and everything that I have dealt with, I have personally made it my own endeavour to try to use my loss as a tool to bridge the racial gap. I grew up mostly on the reserve. I know what it's like to live in both worlds, and I'm very open-minded. I understand that a lot of non-native people, non-indigenous people, have a hard time trying to communicate this too. I get that; I understand that. I try to do the best I can to use this as a tool to open it up, to talk about things openly and forgivingly.

• (1225)

Again, thank you so much for this opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to have to go to four-minute rounds here for timing.

We'll start with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thanks to you both for your service.

My condolences to you and your family for your loss.

As we travelled across the country this past week, we learned an awful lot more about issues that have come about. Some of what we heard is similar to your story, Veronica. A lot of our first nations, it appears, both in the present and in the past, have crossed to the United States and served in the U.S. A question we've asked ourselves many times is "Why?"

I'm just wondering whether either of you could answer that for us. It would help me, at least, wrestle with understanding why that is.

Veronica, do you want to go first?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Robert Kitchen: In your discussions with your husband, did he ever express to you why he chose to serve in the U.S. versus in Canada?

Phillip, could you add to that after Veronica, please?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Well, my husband was always infatuated with the U.S. military because of their technology, their military weapons and vehicles, and just the whole idea of being able to travel and try different bases throughout the States. He was just generally ambitious—his personality.

I think what inspired him was 9/11. He talked about how he wanted to fight the war against terrorism in the States. Because Canada wasn't really on board the way the U.S. was at that time, it made him want to be recognized as a first nations soldier who went the extra mile to go fight in another country for our people and our country, as well, as an ally.

That's why he wanted to join the U.S.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Mr. Ledoux.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: Mr. Ledoux, we'll have to come back to you. They're going to try to fix the technical problem.

Mr. Kitchen, the floor is still yours.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Veronica, in terms of what you mentioned about serving after 9/11, I think all around Canada we heard a number of aspects along those lines. I thank your husband for doing that.

That technology is different. I understand that. I come from Saskatchewan. My home is Estevan. It's so nice to have people from Saskatchewan here, because we understand Saskatchewan. I hate to say it, but a lot of people here don't understand Saskatchewan and the challenges we have.

• (1230)

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: We were just up in Beauval last week and met with many people. The mayor from Isle-à-la-Croix came down. We had a great conversation and learned from them.

The issue they mentioned a number of times was on getting that support. You mentioned the challenges you have around support for you as a family member, being the spouse of an American soldier. You've educated me today on the aspect of TAPS. I'm really not familiar with that.

Could you tell us what that entails?

Ms. Veronica Morin: TAPS is the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. It's for military families and their dependants across all military branches. The founder of the non-profit organization is Bonnie Carroll. They provide services in the form of Good Grief camps for children. My four-year-old went to one—the baby was still too young to attend the daily activities—and he always remembers that. He always wishes they had that here.

I do understand the big difference, and that this is not a common thing in Canada. My situation is very unique, but it's very current, too. This isn't regarding World War I, II, or III, or everything within the past hundred years. This is today. When I go home, I still have to put my kids to bed and remember that it's still just the three of us. It's been nine years. I'll wake up tomorrow morning and I still won't have my husband there. This is a daily thing that I deal with still.

I've even gone to widows' retreats. Being able to relate to other widows and relate to their experiences has really helped. But then to come back home to Canada, and to not have that, and to try to function and cope with current issues and current affairs—it still affects us.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lambropoulos, you have four minutes.

Ms. Emmanuela Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Great.

Is the audio fixed?

The Chair: No, not yet.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: No? Well, most of my questions were for....

I'm sorry, but we still can't hear you, so I'll start with Veronica. If we can hear you later, I'll ask you some questions.

Ms. Morin, thank you for being with us today. Thank you for sharing your really tough experience with us. We appreciate it.

This is the first time, I think, we've had somebody here who's the widow of someone who served in the States, so I'm not really sure what happens. You mentioned that the service stopped once you moved. The States cannot offer you any kind of support because you're living here?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes. I have reached out and used the 1-800 number provided by TAPS for military families. Even trying to call across...some places can't even accept my phone call. The message I get on the phone is, "We cannot be reached from your country", and that's been frustrating. I have an American income, so when I try to call and enquire about my pay, that's the message I get from them. I saw a lawyer though JAG at the Minot Air Force Base last spring to let them know my issues about it. I stay in contact with them in working to address that issue as well.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Have you met anyone else living in your area in Canada who is experiencing similar issues—for instance, someone whose deceased husband worked in the military in the States?

•(1235)

Ms. Veronica Morin: No widows; the other vet I met who worked stateside, I think in the U.S. Army, is named Aaron Ledoux. He's actually where Phillip is right now.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay.

What would you say was the biggest issue your husband dealt with in the military in the United States that non-indigenous soldiers didn't necessarily have to deal with? What did you feel was the biggest difference between the two?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Honestly, we found it to be a more welcoming community being stateside. When we stated that we were first nations, that we were aboriginal people from Canada, people were amazed. They would find reasons to try to relate to us. All of a sudden, everybody had a little bit of Cherokee blood in them just to try to relate to us.

I remember maybe two or three incidents when someone made some racial slur about Indians or whatever and my husband spoke up. He literally would stand up, even though his rank was lower than the supervisor's, and speak out: "Why did you say that? Do you realize that I'm first nations?" That's just how he was. He never stood for that kind of treatment. That's why it affects me so much coming home and having to deal with that. I had never experienced this before, prior to moving to the States, to the point where it was recognizable, so I was kind of shocked. I was like, "Well, I can do something about this, in a good way, and turn my negative situation into something positive." And I feel like this is something positive.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: You felt that maybe during his time in the military over there, there were some people who would

be racist, but overall, he was able to stand up for himself and people respected the fact that he did. He felt included in the group.

Ms. Veronica Morin: There were very few incidents, considering we were stationed in Fort Eustis, Virginia, for the first four years of his military career, and two years in Fort Drum, New York.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: If you were to give us recommendations on Canadian soldiers and widows whose husbands passed away during military service, what is the number one recommendation you would give us to help support the families of these deceased veterans?

Ms. Veronica Morin: My number one recommendation would be to make an effort to reach out to them, keep them in the loop, and provide long-term casualty assistance after their husbands have passed away, because this is such a tough subject to even talk about. I have met very few widows who can even talk about their husbands or go visit their graves. This has not been easy for me, but I believe that something good will come out of it. That's what I'm hoping for. I had a really tough time trying to squeeze nine years of my experience into 10 minutes of talking.

Providing more spaces like this and more opportunities would be helpful, and to carry on. I hope this doesn't come down to just talking.

The Chair: Thank you.

I apologize, Mr. Ledoux. I think you can hear us. They've just informed me that it will take over half an hour to get our technical problem fixed on your end.

With agreement with the committee, we can invite you back in a couple of weeks, if you would be so kind as to come back. I know a lot of people around the table want to ask you questions personally. We'll have the clerk email you; I believe the date is in two weeks. No, next week. We can confirm that.

You can hear us. If you want to stay on board and hear the testimony from Veronica, you're more than welcome. We do appreciate you taking the time and having patience with our staff and us today, for the technical glitch.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Could you send us the proposal that you sent to the minister's office as well, so that we can have that added to our notes?

The Chair: You heard that? Could you send the proposals that you showed to the clerk, and she'll get them to us.

Now we go with Mr. Johns for four minutes.

•(1240)

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Mr. Ledoux. I know you can hear us but we can't hear you. I look forward to your testimony. I want to thank you for your service, sir, for our country, and for the organization that you represent.

Veronica, I really appreciate you sharing your story and your husband's story. My condolences to you.

You talked about the 90 days that you've been waiting. It's beyond 90 days. We're into...what, 150 days, plus? Could you speak about what that does in terms of your situation, in that period when you're waiting and there's a delay?

Ms. Veronica Morin: I'm definitely not sitting back and waiting for someone to come help me. I research stuff online and I try to find things within my local community. In Saskatoon, we live in the community of Silverwood. In Silverwood, I'd literally go for drives just to read billboards and posters on different buildings and stuff, to try to find any free or cheap programs that I could join in the meantime, until vetfit could get back to me and have a program set up.

I used to have a personal trainer who could help me work out my grief. That was super helpful and I wish I could afford to keep doing that, but it's really expensive. That was one thing I realized moving home: how much more expensive Canada is, compared to the States.

Mr. Gord Johns: Sure.

Did the government give you a timeline, after the 90 days? When you talked to them recently, did they give you a timeline on how long it's going to take before they get back to you?

Ms. Veronica Morin: No, they just said that they would get back to me in 90 days.

After the 90 days, I emailed them that it's been 90 days.

Mr. Gord Johns: You talked about people in your community. I think it was your cousin or family members. What kinds of challenges are they facing? Is it PTSD or any of the issues related to their service?

Ms. Veronica Morin: It's really hard to talk to my aunt, whose late husband was army reservist Corporal Derek Smallboy. They have six kids together and she lives on-reserve. Our home reserve is two hours north of where I live. It's really tough for her to try to talk to me about stuff, but she always has questions for me and I don't know where to direct her.

Being able to talk to her is kind of on and off, and it's frustrating because I don't know how to help her. I think it's just as frustrating for her, too, because she expects me to be able to offer some kind of help or information to her.

Mr. Gord Johns: Getting access to information and services available would be a huge benefit.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes. I know her kids really have a tough time. There are six kids.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you encounter any veterans in your community who have served?

Ms. Veronica Morin: I am actually a member of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veteran's Association. I do stay in contact with them a lot. I try to keep up with what they're doing. It's different because my situation is so unique, so it's really hard to try to have an input or some kind of specific support for myself because a lot of them are veterans from World War II and the Korean War. There's nobody really current besides Aaron Ledoux, but I haven't really had a chance to talk to him much about his experiences.

Mr. Gord Johns: You talked about TAPS. Can you speak a bit about TAPS and what was involved in that program that we could offer here and learn from?

Ms. Veronica Morin: I would actually love to be totally involved with anything that's like TAPS. I think my kids would be overjoyed if we did have something like that in Saskatchewan. TAPS not only provides grief camps for kids, but widows' retreats, spousal retreats, siblings' retreats, parents' retreats. It's a really big non-profit organization. The last widows' retreat I went to was in Alaska, where I did a five-kilometre marathon in memory of my husband. They do things like that. Everything they do is in memory of a loved one who served in the military.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Samson, you have four minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Mr. Ledoux, for your service and your testimony. We'll get an opportunity to hear from you next week, I understand. Thank you again.

Veronica, thank you very much for your testimony and sharing some of your challenges. We need to hear them, as much as it is difficult. We appreciate your being here with us, sharing.

I'm not sure if the members around the table really, truly understand—I don't—the difference between the U.S. and Canadian benefits.

If you were in the States today, what would you have? Here you are in Canada. What do you have? Are you getting any services from Veterans Affairs? Are you getting any services from Canadians at all?

• (1245)

Ms. Veronica Morin: No.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Is that the norm?

Ms. Veronica Morin: I guess, because I don't really know either. This is all kind of new to me too. All I know is what I've tried to research and tried to get help with. One thing I forgot to mention was taxes. I have to do taxes stateside. With my income, I pay taxes stateside, so I have to go in person and do my taxes. I usually go to Minot Air Force Base, which is the closest military base to us. Even dealing with taxes on the Canadian side, I still have to file taxes here too even though I don't have an income. I have to make a tax payment.

Mr. Darrell Samson: From what we heard last week in testimony, there are actually a lot of indigenous people who have served with the U.S. Army or the U.S. government. I would try to see if the organization and the associations for indigenous veterans in communities have some information that they could help you with. I find it difficult to comprehend that our government doesn't have some responsibility, and they have some agreements between both countries. I don't know why we wouldn't.

You are in a very challenging situation, to say the least. How are your kids doing? That's an important question. It's nine years now.

Ms. Veronica Morin: My oldest son is 12 years old now. He's reaching his pubescent years, so he needs a male figure and someone he can relate to. I think that's something he's struggling with right now, having a male in his life. I'm the oldest of all my siblings, so I've always been pretty independent and always done things on my own anyway. I'm not always the most approachable person to family members because I've dealt with so much because I've had to be the way I am, and it's for a reason. Even being with my kids, I'm learning to be more supportive and affectionate to them. We've always been super close because it's always been just us. I've never actually had a time to grieve until now that they're able to cook for themselves. I'm not potty training anybody. I'm not having to feed anybody. I have the time and opportunity to come and do things like this. My youngest is actually struggling with not having memories of his dad and trying to comprehend that we actually lived that life.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser, you have four minutes.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Mr. Samson, you can finish that questioning.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you very much, Mr. Fraser.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Be quick.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Do you have a caseworker or anybody to help you? I feel that there's a real gap here between the Canadian and American governments. We have to do this, because basically, if I understand, you would almost have to move back to the States to have services. That's not right—

Ms. Veronica Morin: No.

Mr. Darrell Samson: —because you're a Canadian, and you have your home.

Do you have any caseworker?

Ms. Veronica Morin: The closest caseworker I am eligible for is in Fort Lewis in Washington. I have been trying to get hold of them. I hope I don't have to drive down there myself to go to them.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thank you Mr. Ledoux and Ms. Morin, for being here.

Mr. Ledoux, I'm sorry we will have to wait until next time for questions to be posed to you.

Ms. Morin, thank you so much for being here. Your family and your community must be so proud of you for the courage it takes to do what you're doing and to come here today to share your story with us so that we can hopefully make things a little bit better going forward.

You talked about the counselling services you have been involved with. I know your children may have had some difficulties psychologically as well. Are you receiving the services that are available now? If so, are they being paid for by the U.S. veterans' office? How does that work?

• (1250)

Ms. Veronica Morin: As far as I know, the mental health services I have are covered by Indian Affairs, so I don't pay for them, but when I first started, I was paying for them.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Okay.

Veterans Affairs Canada, then, is now taking care of those?

Ms. Veronica Morin: No.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Who is taking care of them?

Ms. Veronica Morin: It's covered by our treaty status.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Okay. All right.

One thing we know is pretty important in dealing with difficult situations like this is community support, family support, support of peers, or other people who have been through it. That's why it's so important for the work you're doing to support other families and widows who are grieving and going through this incredibly difficult situation.

Can you talk a little bit about the support you have received on Big River First Nation reserve and about whether there is something Veterans Affairs Canada could do in these situations to help the community assist you in making sure your family is taken care of?

Ms. Veronica Morin: They have set aside a day in remembrance of my husband. They have helped by making sure they keep his memory alive and that everybody is proud of who he was, knowing that he came from the same community as our community members—making him almost a symbol of pride because he lived a life that was worth being recognized. Our youth can be proud to say that many of them even knew him and met him. When he would come home on leave, he would go to the schools and talk to the kids and would wear his uniform.

They have also opened up a centre for post-secondary students. It's called the Sgt. Darby Morin Centre of Excellence for Business Development. They have done things like that to keep his memory.

Mr. Colin Fraser: That's wonderful. He sounds like a wonderful guy.

Ms. Veronica Morin: He was.

Mr. Colin Fraser: I'm sure he would be very proud of you. Thank you for that.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Kitchen, you have four minutes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you again.

I can relate to you about paying your taxes in the U.S. and Canada. My wife nursed in the States because the hospital is right across the line, nine miles away from us. We had to do those things for years while she worked down there, paying U.S.... Then you have to wait. Then you have to submit Canadian taxes, and the tax rates are different. It's a huge change, and do they accept that you paid in the U.S.?

I can relate to what you're talking about.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Thank you.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You mentioned that you have tried to contact Veteran Affairs. Have you been doing that all online?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Saskatoon has a brand new facility. Have you gone there?

Ms. Veronica Morin: No. I just talked to my counsellor last Thursday, and she told me about it. She said maybe I can try it. Because it is an online application, I have yet to find out if I even qualify for their services. She said they are starting this week—today actually, Tuesday.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You talk a little bit about it being impersonal, etc., but when you go to this one in Saskatoon, you go through a door and then sit in a room, and you have to go through walls and talk through walls. It's not personal. Just be prepared for that when you go to see it.

Ms. Veronica Morin: All right.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You mentioned your husband. When he came back he talked to the youth and to the schools. Have you done that?

Ms. Veronica Morin: I do take my sons to go speak at the Remembrance Day ceremonies on our reserve. I've always made an effort to go there. It's hard because it's so personal, especially there because that's our community. I've been encouraging my boys to step up and speak because I think the kids really enjoy that.

I've heard from so many other vets who have been invited to come speak at their ceremonies and they said that out of a lot of the schools the kids there have been the most respectful, listening to everybody speaking, especially when they speak about Darby because a lot of them remember him and they still talk about him. His memory is still very much alive there.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I think you have a great story that you should be sharing with your nation and to let them know that story, and your children as well, if they feel comfortable doing it, of course.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: You talked a little bit about discrimination. Do you feel there's any discrimination towards you being the widow of a U.S. veteran and being in Canada with Canadian veterans?

•(1255)

Ms. Veronica Morin: When I first moved home I experienced discrimination, for example going shopping and being followed around the store. A part of me wanted to stop the saleslady and tell her I can pay for my stuff. I'm not here to steal anything, and don't treat me like this because you don't even know that I've made the ultimate sacrifice for our country, just for you to have the right to follow me around the store and treat me the way you're treating me.

I can't say stuff like that, but that's what I think in my head. I just can't say it. That's just an example of the kind of discrimination I felt. To see my kids have to deal with that in school and at grade school it's not something I would wish for any parent to deal with. Yes, it's very heartbreaking.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll end with Mr. Bratina. We have a couple of minutes.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you very much.

I want to say to both of you how impressed I am and we are that you faced issues in your lives, very different situations, and you decided not to sit back and hope something happens. You've come all this way to speak to us, and Mr. Ledoux via technical hook-up, and I think it's laudable that you're not going to let wrongs go unrighted.

I think we owe it to you, as the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs and all parties, and I'm sure we all agree that we'll get a response. We may not be able to solve everything but we'll certainly take the issues we've heard and see that the powers that be understand them and hopefully come up with solutions for you.

In your case, Veronica, with your children, you've gone through a rough patch. My hope is—because my son's now 35 and he's doing other things—that they will grow into a new kind of respect for the history of your family. Do you see that?

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Your husband was an honourable, respectful soldier.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes.

Mr. Bob Bratina: He deserves the love and acknowledgement of his sons. I'm sure that will come along for you.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Thank you.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Just for the specific issues you've brought to us, I'm wondering if what you're getting at is that somehow the Canadian and U.S. militaries need to coordinate these programs.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Yes, I think we really need a middle person to bridge the gap that's between our countries. It doesn't make sense to me and I don't think it makes a lot of sense to other people so obviously it's something that needs to be addressed and looked at carefully.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thank you .

Mr. Ledoux, I wrote down a lot of notes when you were speaking so I'm looking forward to getting some answers when we have an opportunity to return.

Thank you both.

Ms. Veronica Morin: Thank you.

The Chair: That ends our time for today. I'd like to thank both of you for all you are doing to help veterans and continued support. I do apologize about our technical difficulty. The clerk will get back to you with a timeslot in the next couple of weeks.

That ends today's meeting. We'll adjourn and thank you both again.

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