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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1835)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** Good evening. Welcome to the fifth meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Pursuant to the motion passed on February 8, 2022, the committee is meeting to consider the desecration of monuments to veterans.

I would like to welcome our colleague Cathay Wagantall, who is now a member of the committee, as well as our colleague Brenda Shanahan, who is acting as an alternate this evening.

[English]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. You are aware that the webcast will always show the person speaking, rather than the entirety of the committee.

Today's meeting is also taking place in a webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can, therefore, only view the meeting in gallery view.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants of this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted. I would remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

With regard to the list of speakers, the clerk of the committee and I will do our best to maintain the established speaking order for all members, whether they attend the meeting in person or remotely.

I would now like to extend a warm welcome to our witness, Mr. Steven Clark, from the Royal Canadian Legion. Mr. Clark is the national executive director. We will now turn the floor over to him for his opening remarks.

Mr. Clark, you have five minutes to deliver your statement. We will then go into the question and answer period.

You have the floor.

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark (National Executive Director, The Royal Canadian Legion):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the invitation to the Royal Canadian Legion to appear before you today.

I am Steven Clark, national executive director. I am a veteran and I also served for 10 years as the director of Canada's national Remembrance Day ceremony held at the National War Memorial. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, positioned in front of the memorial, was a millennium project initiated by the Legion, adding to the special significance that this sacred site has to our organization.

The Legion is a large, national organization united around a mission that has remained unchanged for our almost 100 years of existence. It is to support veterans, serve our communities and country, and promote remembrance. The Legion has undertaken numerous remembrance initiatives to bring focus to service and sacrifice, such as the poppy campaign, where upwards of 20 million poppies are distributed annually throughout the country as a visual pledge to never forget. The yearly poster and literary contest has the participation of 100,000 students each year who show what remembrance means to them through their artistic works and literary compositions. The virtual poppy drop is a projection on Centre Block and the Senate of Canada buildings.

Legion commands and branches also organize and conduct remembrance ceremonies at memorials and cenotaphs in communities nationwide. Despite these large-scale and other widespread remembrance efforts, there are those who just do not, or choose not, to understand service and sacrifice.

Memorials and monuments are community gathering places for commemorations. They are a physical presence standing as important symbols of our commitment to honour and remember. They establish a historical link from the present to our military heritage. They are to be revered, but sadly, they are not free from desecration. For example, in 2006, three males were caught urinating on the National War Memorial. At that time there were calls for more security at the site. In 2009, the provincial cenotaph in Fredericton was vandalized. In 2012, the Inukshuk memorial for Afghan veterans, erected at Legion headquarters in Ottawa, was toppled. The individual responsible for desecrating this memorial—which was donated by Richard and Claire Léger, the National Silver Cross Mother for 2005—never owned up to their actions. Just last year in 2021, the memorial wall in Cranbrook, British Columbia, was vandalized.

These are just four examples of disrespect. How society responds to such reprehensible acts is paramount. Some countries have introduced or enacted bills to address the desecration of war memorials, but it is so unfortunate that governments have had to legislate penalties as a deterrent to such inexcusable actions, rather than individuals showing an understanding of respect and the application of common sense and personal decency.

If not corrected, ruinous behaviour has a penchant for repetition. As a society, a government, an organization and individuals, we all have a responsibility to protect the sanctity of memorials and to preserve the memory of the fallen. Memorials are symbols of a grateful nation's collective reminiscence, where we pause to honour, thank and remember them.

With reference to the National War Memorial of late, appropriating the sacred site for use as a backdrop for displays of disobedience, inappropriate messaging or attempts to legitimize or push an alternate agenda beyond one with a purely remembrance focus, or to stand by and idly watch as these things take place, especially by those in a position of civil authority, is simply wrong. We need to do better. Our fallen deserve better.

Mr. Chair, the Legion thanks you and the committee for the opportunity to make this presentation as part of this important study.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Clark.

Now let's start with a round of questioning.

I invite the first vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Frank Caputo, to start, for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

• (1840)

**Mr. Frank Caputo (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank Mr. Clark for coming. It's indeed a pleasure to see him again. I had one question for Mr. Clark. Actually, before I even do that, I want to thank Mr. Clark for his service, first and foremost, and for appearing.

The criminal law does address this in a fairly recently passed law. It is in relation to a war memorial, under "Mischief", which is section 430 of the Criminal Code of Canada. I'm not sure if Mr. Clark is aware of that provision.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I am aware of that provision, yes.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** You mentioned in your opening statements that we need to do better and there are problems. You cited a number of examples of reprehensible behaviour that I'm sure everybody on this committee would denounce.

Do you have any opinion, sir, as somebody in your position on behalf of the Legion, as to whether these provisions are adequate or appropriate?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** It's an important question, but a difficult one to answer. It should be inherent in everyone that you absolutely don't do these things that we have witnessed of late, yet there has to be some kind of protection afforded to memorials when actions go beyond what they should be.

The act identifies penalties. There could be a monetary penalty, but we have to understand what the value is of the penalties that are put in place. If a monetary penalty was a deterrent to such horrible actions, people would never get a second speeding ticket or parking ticket. Financial penalties are not always the answer. We have to take a look at other ways that we can bring justice to those who commit these acts.

Penalties are needed, unfortunately, but I don't know if it's the full answer.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I respect what you have to say. I'm not sure if you're aware, but the penalty is exactly the same as for impaired driving, for instance, and a lot of people do that more than once. I take your point on that.

When you say there needs to be more, are you talking about a stricter punishment under the code, as in there should be incarceration, or perhaps a different way of dealing with this?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There should be a different way of dealing with it.

Back in 2006, when a gentleman was caught urinating on the National War Memorial, he didn't receive a financial penalty for his infraction. However, there was a day of restorative justice. He came to Legion headquarters. He spoke with veterans. He learned about the importance of remembrance. He spent time. That, I think, had a much greater impact on him and his future actions than if he had paid a fine of a thousand dollars.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I take your point, sir.

It's interesting that what you described as restorative justice or alternative dispute resolution is actually a step below a criminal charge. I don't know about the jurisdiction in Ontario, but in British Columbia, any prosecutor has the discretion to do that. It's an interesting thought on that. I respect exactly what you said there.

When we look at these things, there has to be a balance of access and protection. Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** That is a very important question and you hit it right on the head. We have to make sure that these memorials are protected, but we cannot be so restrictive that we prevent public access to them. How do you accomplish that? The Legion and I would not want to see anything permanent in place that would impede an individual's want, need or desire to pay their personal respects, because how you remember someone is a very personal expression. However, at the same time, you have to make sure that the memorials are protected.

Perhaps as a first step, we need to focus on signage. There is currently a sign in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, acknowledging, "Here lie the remains of Canada's unknown soldier" and asking people to "Please treat this grave with respect". That's not always the case and it's not in an obvious place, but the intent was to not make it obvious. Maybe we need to do a better job of where we position certain things.

• (1845)

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** I take your point on that. At the end of the day, we don't necessarily want to draw attention. The attention should be on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, not deterring the group of people, big or small as it may be, who really don't recognize the sanctity of that space. Does that make sense?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely, yes.

**Mr. Frank Caputo:** Thank you.

I'm sorry, Chair. I think I'm probably coming up to my time here and I don't want to run over.

**The Chair:** Exactly. Thank you, Mr. Caputo.

Now, for six minutes, let's go to Mrs. Rechie Valdez.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.):** Good evening, colleagues and Mr. Chair.

I just want to take a moment and thank you, also, Mr. Clark, for your sacrifice to serve our country, and just for being here as a valuable witness to all of us on this important study.

While we are here in committee we just need to acknowledge that there is a war taking place on the other side of the world. President Putin's war in Ukraine is a war on freedom, on democracy and on the rights of Ukrainians and all people. We continue to stand with Ukraine, its people and the Ukrainian Canadian community here in Canada.

Mr. Clark, I agree with your opening remarks. As a society and as an individual we all have a responsibility to protect the sanctity of memorials and to preserve the memory of the fallen. The reason this motion was put forward was so that we do our part as a committee so that the disrespectful behaviour is not repeated.

Mr. Clark, can you describe what you feel when our memorials and monuments are desecrated, and particularly the ones in the most recent example that you saw last month?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There are feelings of condemnation, anger, disgust and bewilderment that people would not understand what these memorials stand for.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you.

Our soldiers and veterans like you risked their lives and fought for our freedom, and these are freedoms that we should all be very grateful that we have today. I know I am very appreciative of that.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as you mentioned, was a special project. In your remarks you said that it was initiated by the Legion. What comments do you have for the individual who was captured in the videos that we've seen, standing on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and screaming the word "freedom"?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** It's interesting when you talk about freedom, especially with what we see in other parts of the world right now, and how ironic it is that freedom could be misinterpreted in the way that it was.

It is unfortunate, however, that the individual who was dancing on the tomb was fully aware of the sanctity of that site, what the site stood for and what the tomb stood for, because the military officer who spoke to that group just prior to her taking this action explained that. As soon as he turned to leave, she jumped on the tomb and did what she did. That makes it even that much more horrible, because she fully understood what she was doing and acted in defiance.

I have to shake my head sometimes at the interpretation or the definition that people have of "freedom". The freedom to dance atop a tomb is not one of those.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you, Mr. Clark. I agree with you there.

In an attempt to secure the monuments, there were barricades put up and they were bolted. Unfortunately, the Ottawa protesters took them down. What can you say about these actions?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** The Legion did not agree with those barricades being taken down, but it was interesting. When we put out that statement on February 12, the response that we had back was split. Half of the people we heard from supported the Legion's position of not taking those barricades down because we did need to make sure that the site remained safe. However, the other half responded with extreme negativity and hatred to the point of threatening Legion headquarters' social media team. We were called woke anti-veteran extremists who were pushing the propaganda of the mainstream media and spewing prime ministerial talking points. It was unbelievable the response that we received.

Regardless, we stand on our position that the intent of those barricades was not to be permanent. It was a temporary safeguarding measure, and it was important to be respected.

• (1850)

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** The Department of Public Works and Government Services, similar to what you're saying, mentioned that delicate balance between providing free access to monuments while protecting them during protests.

Can you provide your input on the choice that we have between access versus protecting them?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** It comes down to priority. The priority at the time was making sure the memorial was safe so that in the future, in the very near future, we would all have free access to be able to pay our respects in the way that we would personally choose to.

As a temporary measure, it was important, and it should have been respected. We were fully supportive of that barricade in a temporary capacity, but not in a permanent capacity.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** In your opinion, what can be done further to protect our memorials and monuments?

I do like the idea that you brought up before as far as how we could give penalties to those who have disrespectful behaviour, but is there any other idea you can share with us today?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** A lot of it comes down to education and awareness. We have to do a better job of educating. It starts with youth and making sure that the public is aware. In a perfect world, there would be a federal department that would look after the curriculum in schools across the country, but that's not the case. It's all provincially directed, so there is no standardization of what is taught through the school system. Ideally we would love to have greater emphasis on history. Legion branches, Legion members focus on that during the remembrance period every year. I'd like to see something grander and more standardized across the country, but that's a pipe dream.

**Mrs. Rechie Valdez:** Thank you.

In my riding of Mississauga—Streetsville, I proudly have Legion 139. The work they do is tremendous.

Thank you, Mr. Clark, for answering my questions.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Mr. Clark, as you know, we have interpretation.

[*Translation*]

We will continue with the second vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Luc Desilets.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, Mr. Clark, for being with us. It is always a pleasure to hear from you. Your life experience and your experience as a military man colour this discussion in a very interesting way.

One thing really caught my eye earlier. You'll excuse my ignorance; yet I've been to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier several times.

Are there any signs describing what it's about, or prohibition signs, for example?

[*English*]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There are no panels up other than the plaque that is inset in the ground in front of the tomb. In fact, having interpretive panels around the site is something the Legion had brought up a number of years ago. We had initial discussions with Canadian

Heritage, but we did not pursue that further. Perhaps now is the time to do that so that we can talk about not only the tomb, why it is there and what it stands for, but also the inscriptions that are on the memorial—the First and Second World Wars, Afghanistan, South African war—so that people can get a better understanding of exactly what the sanctity of this site represents.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you.

I am a former school principal. No matter how much you explain things to young people, sometimes it's not enough. The idea of putting up a sign or signs to set boundaries or restrictions may seem ridiculous, but young adults and adults alike could better understand the meaning, importance or symbolism of it all.

Personally, I would encourage you strongly to do this. Just because a 25-year-old adult does something stupid on such a symbolic monument doesn't mean they don't have the mental age of a 15-year-old. That being said, I really like this idea and I think it's mostly about education in this area.

Your paper alludes to the Inuksuk memorial, dedicated to Afghanistan veterans, which was also desecrated or vandalized, 10 years ago. What struck me about this was that those who did the deeds were known, but no one was held accountable.

Do you have any more information on that? Why weren't they held accountable?

• (1855)

[*English*]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** That's an interesting question, but I have to say one thing about that. The monument was extremely heavy, so to topple it was a deliberate act. The outpouring of support from the community to help restore, replace and shore up that memorial was simply outstanding.

One thing that did strike me was that for weeks afterward that memorial was tended to, kept clean and kept free of any kind of debris, rocks, grass or anything. In my mind, I thought whoever perpetrated that act perhaps had a moment of reflection, realized what they did was wrong and as their way of penance took care of that memorial. It's completely unfounded, but I would like to think that whoever did it initially realized the error of their ways and tried to make amends.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** It would be nice if that were the case.

Do you have any recommendations for us, as we have to table a report and recommendations in the House?

It is true that this event took place in a very particular context, as the city of Ottawa was occupied by thousands of people and people from the extreme right.

Given this context, despite everything, do you have any recommendations for the protection of these monuments?

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I would not want to see anything permanent put in place. Again, remembrances are very personal expressions of honour and thanks. We don't want to do anything that's permanent. Having signage in place would help. We need to focus also on education. Veterans Affairs Canada does a superb job with the teaching materials they make available to schools and youth, all free of charge. That needs to continue to receive support.

Simply, it's raising awareness. That is where we need to start. Again, we need to start with our youth. That's why I'm so focused on the importance of education. We can't regulate remembrance. That's important. We have to make sure it remains spontaneous. Whatever we do, we can't regulate it.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I totally agree with you. Also, repression does not necessarily produce results. I am very interested in the notion of awareness raising, which you mentioned.

In your program, is the importance of monuments and their symbolism addressed?

Shouldn't there be some publicity to explain a little bit about them?

[English]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. The Legion produces every year a teaching guide. We make it available to teachers across the country to talk about the importance of various remembrance initiatives and symbols, with memorials being one. We have been asked from time to time if memorials glorify war. That could not be further from the truth. Memorials are an expression and a remembrance of what those before us have done so that we are in the position we are in now in society. We have to make sure that people understand exactly what the memorials stand for.

Interestingly, the Canadian memorial database is a repository of 8,200 known memorials and cenotaphs across the country. There are memorials in virtually every community. It's important that the students in those communities liaise to understand.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Mr. Clark.

[Translation]

Mr. Desilets, your time is up.

[English]

Let's turn the mike over to Ms. Rachel Blaney for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP):** Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Clark. It's very good to see you before the committee again. I want to thank you for your service, of course, and for the many ways in which you've done that service. I think that needs to be recognized as well.

For me, this is really sad. It's really hard that we have to have this discussion. I think it's important that people understand what this means. It's a place of remembrance. I'm from B.C. and my con-

stituents have flown all the way to Ottawa. I've met with them and we've gone to the tomb. They're either veterans or they are the loved ones of people who have served. They've brought mementoes, and those mementoes are received. They're taken underneath and held there. People feel such gratefulness that the picture of their loved one or some memento is there, and that it's held.

I'm just wondering if you could speak to the committee, but also to all Canadians, about how important this particular memorial is across this country, and about how it's more than just what we see above ground. It's also what's below and held in remembrance.

• (1900)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. You have to look back at when the government first started the competition to construct this memorial back in 1925. Their vision at that time was to keep alive the spirit of heroism and self-sacrifice. They wanted it to represent everything that was noble and great, exemplified by those who sacrificed their lives at that time in the First World War.

For people who stop by the memorial now and leave mementoes of their loved ones, those who were among the 118,000 Canadians who fell in service to this country, it is their connection with their lost loved one. It is with an individual who no longer has a voice and yet is represented by monuments and memorials such as this one. It's very important to establish that connection and keep the connection. Knowing that whatever they leave will not be discarded, but will be retained, is personally satisfying to those individuals. I'm so happy that this continues.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you for that.

That was probably one of the most concerning parts for me. I read an article about a veteran who had seen that people were parking near the monument. He went there to take photos of their licence plates because he wanted them to be held to account, as I think many veterans would feel. Sadly, he was threatened with physical violence. I thought, "What a terrible outcome of this situation."

My next question is really about acknowledging the trauma that this kind of desecration could have on people who have served our country. Today I'm here in Campbell River. We have the Wounded Warriors, whom I know the Legion supports, who are doing a run right now to fundraise to bring awareness to people about post-traumatic stress disorder, to understand that our veterans, our military, our folks who are on the front lines—our police, our firefighters, our paramedics—are out there fighting and they have this.

I wonder if you could speak to the impact—maybe unintentional. I will assume that some of the veterans who were there felt that they were protecting it, and I want to respect that. However, I also want to respect that the impact we just saw could have had a profound effect on people, especially those who have served and are struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. In fact, we heard from our Legion OSI special section about that very thing. That memorial stands for all who have served and fallen in military service. It's not for one particular mission or war. Of late, with the war in Afghanistan, we've seen 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces members participate in that particular operation.

Our OSI section was contacted by people who were so adversely affected by what they had seen. It felt like personal disrespect that had been shown to those individuals. It's just very hard to vocalize the impact that you, as an individual who served your country, are seeing now, the disrespect that is shown by the people who you thought were supporting you when you went overseas.

I know the special section reached out to those individuals as much as they could. They offered sessions where they could get together to talk about it. Discussing and talking helps alleviate the pain, but the pain never goes away and this act worsens it.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I only have a minute left. I really want to acknowledge how much you've made it clear that the importance of public access cannot be minimized.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** No.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Would it maybe be appropriate to have protocols so that, when we know a larger protest or, in this case, an occupation is coming, we protect the monuments?

There are more monuments than just the tomb. Of course, just down the street, we have the Korean War monument and the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument. Would it be a good step that we put protection up right away, before the people even arrive, to set that tone of respect?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. Preparedness is key.

Take a look at previous large-scale occupations or protests, for example, in 2002, the G8 “take the streets” Ottawa protest. We would have learned from that. Policing agencies would have learned. Apply what you've learned.

• (1905)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney, and thank you, Mr. Clark.

For the next five minutes, the questions will be asked by Ms. Anna Roberts.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank Mr. Clark. We respect you and appreciate everything you do to help us have the freedoms and enjoy the freedoms that we do in this country. It's very important to me.

We have two monuments in my riding. This year, I witnessed both of them, and what I really appreciated was having the children from the school participate. Because of the lockdowns, unfortunate-

ly things were scaled back, but in the past we have had that opportunity.

One of our monuments is in a community centre area. The veterans come into the community. There's a small gesture where we offer tea, coffee, cookies or whatever. The young children are allowed to come to speak with them, learn about the war and understand that the reason they live in a society such as ours is that we had people like you who went and fought for our freedoms.

Earlier you mentioned education. Would you not agree that it would be more important to have the one-on-one personal aspect in education prior to Remembrance Day and have the young children involved to better understand why we have these freedoms?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. Having a base knowledge, that main level of understanding, is important. This supplements or enhances that. That speaks to what John McCrae talked about in his poem *In Flanders Fields*—passing the torch. You're passing on information. You're passing on lived experiences, and it's important to get those lived experiences while veterans are still here to share that information. It's extremely important, and I agree with you.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** When these acts—I call them acts of violence—occur, would it not be beneficial that the individuals...? You mentioned earlier that, really, a financial situation is of no benefit. Would it not be a combination of both having the financial burden put on the individual and also having that individual commit to either participating with the Legion, understanding, speaking to veterans and maybe even volunteering?

We ask our students in Ontario to volunteer so many hours in order to obtain their high school diploma. I'm not suggesting to treat it as a punishment but maybe as a leaning experience, so that they could go back and maybe speak to their classmates or other adults, depending on who the perpetrator is.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Definitely. The Legion has been involved in a couple of instances exactly as you explained, but you added on a very good point that I did not. It's great that the individual understands from the personal perspective of veterans what they've gone through, but then they go back and pass on that information. I think that's very important, and I like that they are sharing what they have learned so that, hopefully, others will learn from their experiences. That is a very good point.



**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** I have to tell you, I remember the stories from my grandfather and his experiences in the war, which I found were very difficult for him to speak about, but it made me realize why we have freedoms here. It's so crucial for children to learn at a young age, and maybe we could implement this to stop these incidents. Let's be honest; the younger they are, the quicker they learn and the better adults they become.

I like what you said about the financial situation not always being the way to do it. Could there be something that we could implement into the rules that would force or mandate individuals to do that?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** It would be very productive, if it could be done to say that in addition, along with or instead of a financial penalty, there would be a requirement that the individual spend time with a veterans' organization or a school or a veteran. That could be very easily set up, and I think the knowledge gained and the impact would be invaluable.

• (1910)

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know I only have a minute left.

With the construction of any new monuments, would you say that signage and education to make people realize that these are the consequences should these acts continue would be something that should be posted where people can clearly read that?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I would not be supportive of that.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Okay.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I think what we need to do is to stress exactly why the memorials are here, but to make reference to what could happen if you disrespect it would not be the way to go.

**Mrs. Anna Roberts:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to our colleague Churence Rogers, for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to our guest, Mr. Clark, and thank you for your service and the things you do on behalf of veterans and Legions across the country.

Like you and many other Canadians, I too was disgusted to see such blatant disrespect for the National War Memorial site in Ottawa and was very disturbed to see what was going on.

I'd like to focus my attention a little bit on Legions and what they do for our communities across the country. Thank you for everything you do to work with the Legions across Canada. In fact, I have 10 Legions in my riding of Bonavista—Burin—Trinity. I'm so proud of the work that they do for veterans, active military members and their families, and the community at large.

I'm wondering if you could explain some of the services that Legions offer and why you think it is important to keep local Legions at the heart of our local communities.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** From a service perspective, the main goal of Legion branches is to support veterans with the care they need. We are blessed by the generosity of Canadians to have poppy funds available to provide that emergency assistance to veterans who find themselves in need. That is the core of what the organization does, but in addition to that, Legion branches also serve as a community hub or a cornerstone of the community as we have called it.

You will find Legion branches all across the country in communities large and small. They are places where people gather for a variety of reasons. Whether for happy times or not-so-happy times, it is important that there be a gathering location and a spot where people in a community can come together in unity for a purpose.

The work of Legions across the country is very important so that we can continue to make sure that veterans receive those supports and also, as we're talking about today, to ensure that we perpetuate remembrance, that we never put that from our sight. It's always important that we promote remembrance on every occasion we can.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** I agree, Mr. Clark. I am a former high school teacher and administrator and a former mayor of a small community. We engaged regularly with Legions and veterans on Remembrance Day and for other ceremonies throughout the year. Over the last couple of years, of course, with the COVID-19 pandemic, every industry and community has been affected. Nobody has been immune from having to adjust and cope with frequently changing circumstances.

Can you describe how Legions across Canada have dealt with and adjusted their operations because of the pandemic and how resilient they have been during that period?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Throughout the pandemic, I continue to be impressed by the ingenuity of Legion branches across the country. Currently, as of last week, 7% of our branches still have not opened since March 2020, 27% of our branches are fully open and the rest to varying degrees, so the pandemic is still not behind us from an operations point of view.

The Royal Canadian Legion was extremely grateful to the Government of Canada for the veterans organizations emergency support fund that was provided. That was a hand-up. I'm not calling it a handout, but a hand-up, to Legion branches nationwide. Through that program, 998 branches received assistance, and it was a lifeline for them. It enabled them to continue on with their operations, but they had to supplement it. Whether it was through other fundraising initiatives or simply reaching out to the community, that's how they continued on with their operations. Community support was key.

• (1915)

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** I agree. I received numerous phone calls and talked to members of the different Legions throughout Bonavista—Burin—Trinity seeking support. I was happy to see that we were able to deliver some support. I'm not sure whether you have any other ideas about how to provide other levels of support from either the federal or provincial governments or communities at large.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Branches are autonomous and they are responsible for their own affairs. This reaching out to the government for the VOESF was the first time the Legion did that in its 100-year history.

I don't foresee that. We need to make sure that we look after our own operations. I appreciate the sentiment, but we need to progress internally.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** I agree. Actually, it's good to hear that.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Mr. Chair, I'm not sure if I have any time left.

**The Chair:** No, it is over. I'm so sorry.

[*Translation*]

We will now move on to two brief two-and-a-half-minute question periods.

Mr. Desilets, go ahead, please. You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Clark, can you briefly answer my two questions?

Given what's going on right now—I am, of course, talking about this atrocious war that we're experiencing from a distance—do you think that young and old alike are more aware of this whole phenomenon and this notion of sacrifice, freedom, and self-sacrifice?

[*English*]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** On the whole, yes.

Look back to Afghanistan. Prior to that, an individual's connection to war may have been the Second World War, grandfathers or great uncles. Afghanistan brought it to the family and brought it to the neighbours. We're seeing the same thing now with Ukraine. People are more aware and understanding.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Thank you.

Earlier, you mentioned financial penalties.

Do you think it would be more relevant if people who do these things did community service or got involved with veterans' organizations? In Ottawa, there was looting.

Should they be required to do community service, such as helping to clean up or maintain sites, rather than be subjected to monetary penalties?

[*English*]

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Yes, it would. Schoolchildren in the Netherlands do this not out of a penalty but out of a sense of obligation. Having this as a requirement for people who are convicted of such atrocities, absolutely, I would certainly support that.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** Mr. Clark, thank you for your clear answers.

I am finished, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** That's excellent; thank you, Mr. Desilets.

I now recognize Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you again, Chair.

I just have to say that this conversation is so thoughtful, and I really appreciate it. I represent a riding that has 11 Legions. I've done some very interesting Remembrance Days, and so far the most Legions I've reached is four. It's a big distance to cover.

They really are a cornerstone of the community, and I just want to acknowledge how hard it was for Legions—I watched that in my own riding when COVID hit—to even ask for help. I just want to acknowledge that, and I really respect what you said, Mr. Clark, about how forceful these groups are in figuring out how to manage things, how hard they work to make it continue and how flexible they are.

We have talked a lot about education and, I would say, more about accountability than punishment and hopefully having people understand what they do in a new way. As for me, I have young people in my family. I have some cousins who are younger who are serving, and some of my kids' friends are also serving. I think now that we also see what's happening in Ukraine, it's becoming real to young people in many ways because they know that people they know may be participating in one way or another.

I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the desecration of any...and I want to go back to that. You outlined several desecrations that we've seen in the last few years across Canada. How do we bring this to a place where people have more ownership and understand sacrifice? It's a terrible thing to say, but maybe out of seeing Ukraine we will see that sort of connection to what it is to sacrifice for a country.

I leave it at that.

• (1920)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely. You know, I have to go back to a point that was made earlier about youth connecting with veterans on site at a memorial and learning and understanding. That is a key component to developing this awareness and this education, starting with making that connection. I think that if that can be encouraged...and this is one of the reasons the Legion does not support Remembrance Day as a national holiday. It is because we want students to be able to attend these ceremonies with veterans to understand. The veterans explaining what the memorial means and stands for is paramount.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Blaney, and thank you, Mr. Clark.

We're going to have two other interventions for five minutes each, and we're going to start with MP Fraser Tolmie.

Please go ahead, MP Tolmie.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Clark, for joining us today.

As a past service member to another service member, we always think about that thing that's placed in our memory, which is our service number, K62209053.

I want to say thank you very much for your passion and your commitment to being part of remembering those who have gone before us, those who have served. Not everybody in our military is engaged in combat, but they do serve with the understanding that they are putting their lives on the line.

Over the last couple of weeks, as we have been hearing witnesses and testimonies, we know that there has been a history of desecrations and you brought that up in your role. You have witnessed that numerous times. Am I correct?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely, yes. Fortunately, I have not witnessed that numerous times, but I'm aware of numerous incidents.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Am I correct in saying this is not just isolated to one area, but it is across Canada?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Yes, you are correct.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** One thing that needs to be highlighted here is that there seem to be different motives or different reasons that these desecrations happen across Canada. Would you agree with me on that?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** There would be different reasons. Whether it's simply an act of wilful vandalism or an accident, there is still desecration. It doesn't diminish the act of disrespecting the monument.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** Yes, I agree with you 100%. Desecration is desecration. What I'm sad to hear, as we sit in these discussions, is

that this is an ongoing issue that is happening across our country. It is very disappointing.

Some of the comments that have been brought forward by my fellow colleagues, within my party and across the table, are about education. You mentioned freedom and you spoke about what freedom means to you. Would you say that is the only definition of freedom or that others have a different meaning of freedom?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** I would say people have their own interpretation of what freedom is and how they have experienced it and felt it, some people perhaps to a lesser extent than others. Everyone, in essence, is free, but how you express that freedom or how you feel about that freedom will vary between individuals.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** That brings me to the education component of not just on Remembrance Day going to a cenotaph and listening, but the education process of what people went through, what their sacrifices were, what they encountered, how that impacted them and what a new lease on life.

I think about my grandfather when he came back. He was in the British Army. He was part of the British Expeditionary Force. He went over to Europe, with the constant combat, the loss of friends, to come back and have a new lease on life. It's so important for people to hear that, and at an early age. Would you agree with me on that?

• (1925)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely yes, but that transition is difficult for some. For those who make a successful transition, it's wonderful to see, but there are others who are challenged and it's not so easy for them. However, it's important that they do transition back to civilian life and continue on in society.

**Mr. Fraser Tolmie:** I just want to go back to one comment you made, about a repeat offender. I am a repeat offender with speeding tickets and parking tickets, but when I went through my driver's education I was told not to speed.

Even though we want to educate our people, our children, our future, we're human. People just go off the rails sometimes. I just think that is something that's important we have. Would you agree with that statement, sir?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Absolutely, it's an ongoing process.

**The Chair:** Thank you so much.

Now, for five minutes, we have MP Wilson Miao. Please, go ahead.

**Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to my colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Clark, for joining us today on this important study. I have great respect for all veterans, especially in my riding. We have a cenotaph in my riding.

You spoke about the virtual poppy drop projection, which I saw for the first time last November. It was projected onto the Centre Block. It's a very stunning and solemn reminder of all the sacrifices our veterans have made for Canada.

Could you see this idea working anywhere else in Canada? Do you have any exciting plans for similar types of ceremonies that can engage with Canadians of all backgrounds and ages, like this projection on Parliament Hill?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** We have been very fortunate to partner with some wonderful organizations, sporting clubs and activities across the country. In Winnipeg, for example, during hockey games in the remembrance period, they project a variation of the poppy drop around the rink, around the arena, on the ice before the players skate. Rinks across the country are doing the same thing.

There is such an appetite for remembrance across the country, especially during the remembrance period. People and organizations are so willing to undertake that. It's something that we feel is important.

Also important is reaching out to youth. We have been very successful during the last number of years in engaging with the Fortnite digital gaming platform to provide an interactive remembrance non-violent activity for youth so that they can learn. We're taking remembrance to where they are. In the last couple of years, we have done this at 11 p.m. as opposed to 11 a.m., because that's when gamers are online.

We're always cognizant of our audience, this new, younger generation, and we want to make sure that we take every opportunity we can to promote the remembrance theme.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you, Mr. Clark. I really like the idea of getting more youth engaged, especially creating more awareness and allowing them to understand what really happened in our history and show the respect that we should.

I see that the Legion is working in tandem with our war and veterans memorials as being the strongest way we have to remember our fallen and to better serve those veterans who did come home. What can we do better to support our Legions across Canada? How has our government worked with local Legions and the Royal Canadian Legion's main office to better advance the needs of Legions and veterans?

• (1930)

**Mr. Steven Clark:** On a grand scale, it's simply taking care of veterans. Again, Veterans Affairs Canada has been very good at providing supports, benefits and assistance to those who require it. That's something we continually advocate for, making sure of the availability of resources and assistance for veterans when they need it.

Most recently, the government announced the additional \$140 million to keep 595 temporary workers so that disability claims can be continued. The backlog of pending applications will be reduced. That is the best way a government can assist veterans, by taking care of them.

The Legion will be there. It will help. Government also needs to provide that assistance and I'm very happy to see it.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you very much, Mr. Clark, for sharing that. It is good news for all veterans across Canada, what we have been doing as a government.

Do you see any other plans where we can engage more with the newer generation or newcomers to Canada, to allow them to engage with our veterans in the future?

**Mr. Steven Clark:** A lot of it turns back to awareness. We have heard from individuals, new Canadians who have come to the country, that they didn't understand what the poppy was. We are taking opportunities, every chance we get, to talk about the meaning of the poppy and the various remembrance initiatives and representations we have. It again speaks to that education.

I look back to 2015, when Ipsos did a poll about John McCrae and *In Flanders Fields* on the 100th anniversary of the writing of the poem. Only 61% of the respondents were able to identify that McCrae wrote *In Flanders Fields*. Also 24% of the people didn't know it was a Canadian who wrote the poem and it was written during the First World War. We can do better.

**Mr. Wilson Miao:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Miao.

The question period is now over.

On behalf of the members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, I would like to thank Mr. Steven Clark, national executive director of The Royal Canadian Legion, for his testimony.

Like all the other members who have spoken, I too want to pay my respects and thank you for your service and all the sacrifices you have made.

[*English*]

I would add, also, that you are very eloquent when you speak. Thank you so much for your participation in our study.

**Mr. Steven Clark:** Thank you. The pleasure has been mine.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

*[Translation]*

Members of the committee, we will suspend the meeting for about five minutes or, at most, 10 minutes. I invite you to click on the other link, as we will move on to the business of the committee.

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*[The meeting continued in camera.]*





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