



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 108

Thursday, October 10, 2024

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 108 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on March 9 and December 5, 2023, the committee is resuming its study of the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans and the definition of wartime service.

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

As you already know, all comments must be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

Before we begin, I would like to welcome a few colleagues.

We have Mr. Scot Davidson, who is replacing Mr. Tolmie. Welcome.

As you can see, we have a new clerk, Grant McLaughlin, for today's meeting. Thank you for helping us.

I would also like to welcome a group of students aged 13 to 18. They are with us today from Kanata Montessori. They are here to observe the work of the committee.

Welcome.

For the first hour, we have with us, as an individual, Mr. Sean Bruyey. He is a retired captain and air force intelligence officer. We have Mr. Christopher Banks, a retired sergeant. He used to be here in every meeting we had. By video conference, we also have Mr. Michael Blois. He's a lawyer and a veteran.

Before we start, I will tell you that you will have five minutes for your opening statements. However, I have a request on Zoom from Mr. Blake Richards.

Please, Mr. Richards, go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

This morning, I understand you tabled the report on our recent study on the transition to civilian life. Our party had a dissenting re-

port. I know that at least one other party had a supplemental report that they submitted with that report. I was not given an opportunity or informed or made aware in any way that the report would be tabled this morning. That is the usual practice. Usually, if there are dissenting reports, the vice-chairs or parties involved are informed.

Being unable to table that in the House when the report was tabled is, to my mind, a breach of my privilege as a member of the committee.

I would like to ask you, Chair, what happened? Why was I not informed? My understanding is that the other party was also not informed. Can you explain why that happened and indicate what you're going to do to correct it so that we can be given the opportunity we were supposed to be given to present our dissenting and supplemental reports?

The Chair: Mr. Richards, I understand your point of view.

One of the things I have in mind is this: We recently changed from one clerk to another. They asked me when I would be available to table this report, and I said today. I take it the email they sent to the committee was a little late, or something like that.

What I'm going to do is check with the clerk to see what we can do as a procedural thing that can offer you a possibility to say there is a dissenting report on the study.

Is that okay?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets would also like to say something. Please go ahead.

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

While the clerk might not be fully apprised of this, I would like to know what happened to the motion calling for the Minister of National Defence to appear before the committee.

The Chair: I know that, on the very day that the motion was adopted, the request was sent to the minister to appear as soon as possible. We even indicated that there was a limited number of meetings.

To my knowledge, however, the committee has not received any reply in order to plan that meeting.

• (1110)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Was there an acknowledgement of receipt?

The Chair: I can't tell you because I am not informed about that, but the clerk is taking the necessary steps for the minister to appear as soon as possible as part of this study.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Today is the last day of our study. That is really unfortunate. I think the committee would agree to extend our meetings by an hour to allow the minister to appear and to complete this study.

The Chair: As you know, my role is to follow through on the wishes of committee members.

I would ask the witnesses to wait a moment longer.

The next speaker on the list is Mrs. Wagantall.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I just want to finish what I was saying, Mr. Chair.

I learned earlier that Mr. Tomie is away today because his mother passed away. We would like to send him our most sincere condolences.

The Chair: Very well, Mr. Desilets.

The message will be forwarded to him. He is one of our colleagues, his absence is felt, and I hope he will find the strength to weather this difficult period.

Thank you.

[*English*]

Mrs. Wagantall is next.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Just before I make my comment, we are really pleased to have Mr. Davidson with us today. However, no one can truly replace Fraser Tolmie. I know he's listening, so that's good. We can talk later.

That said, I want to clarify something. My understanding is that before you can table a report, you have to inform the committee. Is that correct?

Just to clarify, I mean no harm to the new analyst.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Grant McLaughlin): As you know, I'm here for today's meeting.

I'm not up to date on all of the details of ACVA, but my understanding is that when the report was adopted, among the routine motions was an instruction to the chair to present the report to the House, with no specified date associated with it. There was guidance to do so.

As for the details of what happened with the communications in this specific instance, as indicated, I don't know the answer. We need to look into it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's fair enough.

In other words, there isn't anything in your orders or expectations as chair that requires you to inform the committee before a report is tabled.

The Chair: As I said, we're going to look to the *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*. If we can go back and table the report again with the dissenting report, I will do it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: All right. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The last intervention on the point of order will be from Mr. Sean Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): I'd actually like to speak to both points of order.

First of all, on the one raised by Mr. Richards, I actually agree with him. If there's another dissenting report and they rise in the House and seek to present their dissenting reports, we should all do our best to secure the unanimous consent of each of our parties so that they are allowed to do so. I hope everyone can agree that we can write this by unanimous consent. You can do virtually anything by unanimous consent, and in my view, that shouldn't be very hard to obtain. I would do my part to ensure that nobody from our side says no.

The second one is the point of Mr. Desilets.

[*Translation*]

From my understanding, the minister was invited to appear. I want to present a motion to extend the study. I can't do that through a point of order, but I think we will probably need two additional meetings with witnesses and an hour with the minister. I will present it formally, if necessary, when the time comes.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

Next week we will be working in our respective constituencies. If the committee members wish, we can see after our break week whether we can invite the minister and another witness to appear at the same time. I think the request was for them to appear for at least an hour.

Before we move on to the witness statements, I would like to go back to what Mr. Blake Richards and Mr. Sean Casey said.

Do the committee members consent to presenting the dissenting report at some point?

You are indicating that you do. Thank you.

We will take the necessary steps to remedy that.

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Let's go to our witnesses now.

You're going to have five minutes each for your opening statements. After that, members of the committee will ask you questions. This is the first panel, and we are here for a total of one hour.

I would like to start the meeting with the retired captain, Mr. Bruyea.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Sean Bruyea (Retired Captain, Air Force Intelligence Officer, As an Individual): I sincerely thank committee members for taking up this study, a study that arguably should have been initiated before we went to war in 1990, or even in 1947, when the last of one million Canadians who served during World War II ended their active service.

Why were the 600,000 Canadian Forces members who followed not granted the same entitlements as war veterans when the risks of our active service have been real and tragic?

I profoundly acknowledge Louise Richard, who began this fight for all of us post-war veterans. She co-founded the first Gulf War veterans organization, vigorously advocating and mentoring me while so many veterans suffered in silence.

I thank Harold Davis and Mike McGlennon for pushing for this study. I sincerely appreciate VAC officials who work diligently to provide the data that has, to my awareness, never been organized in the manner in which I submitted it to the committee.

Finally, I thank my son Wilfred, his classmates and the staff at Kanata Montessori for joining us in this remarkable opportunity, one month before Remembrance Day.

When a Canadian enters the military, we sign a contract to accept—unlike any other profession, including police and fire services—that we can be legally ordered into harm's way, potentially losing our lives.

Many have tragically fulfilled their end of the contract. I lost my great-grandfather in World War I and my grandfather in World War II. Others, like a number of veterans in this room, live a daily fulfillment of that contract, with debilitating and often excruciating psychological and physical sacrifices for our nation.

Government chose to change their end of the bargain while we still needed them to uphold the benefits in place at the time of our enlistment. In 2005, Parliament was pressured by war veteran organizations to pass legislation ending a 200-year commitment to life-long pensions for disabled veterans, spouses and their children in favour of one-time lump sums that pay nothing for family members, yet these organizations enshrined protections to keep their lifelong disability pensions.

Let's be clear: There was no meaningful or widespread consultation in passing this law, and what little consultation was done was ignored in the final product. This is not recognition in any sense of the word; this was about saving money and what the architect of the program, Darragh Mogan, stated was a \$1-billion wellness dividend.

In a sad trend, the 2019 pension for life changed the contract yet again, hidden in a budget omnibus bill that prevented committee studies. The Parliamentary Budget Officer studied these three disability regimes. For the cohort of veterans applying between 2019 and 2024, over their lifetime the government would save \$18 billion when compared to these veterans being covered under the Pension Act.

Recognition of military service has two central components: commemoration and compensation. Missing either diminishes both. Recognition is the foundation of a debt owed by, and the gratitude of, a nation to those who serve in uniform. Recognition is the heart of valuing one's service to one's country. Entitlement in law is indispensable to recognition. Recognition requires reciprocal legal obligations. Certainly placing the Persian Gulf War on the cenotaph is a no-brainer.

However, officially labelling us as war veterans may not be accompanied by the entitlement some assume. Granting us World War II veteran benefits would be of little help now, except for the life insurance for the disabled and replacing pain and suffering compensation with a disability pension.

What futures would we have lived had we been granted updated World War II benefits like education, business start-up assistance, land, homebuilding, life insurance and low-cost mortgages, along with public awareness of our sacrifice?

How many suicides could have been prevented and how many families saved, and how many fruitful second careers would have blossomed? What is the personal and family cost of losing so much opportunity and productivity? How much money could government have earned in taxes from these dynamic futures, instead of fighting against paying billions in much-needed disability benefits? What compensation would be appropriate for our lost opportunities?

When we serve, we have the duty to give everything, including our lives. Government doesn't even have the duty to inform us of the benefits to which we're entitled, let alone a duty to care for us. I hope the committee takes up the issue of a duty to inform veterans and their families.

Our obligations to government are limitless; government's obligations to us are non-existent, or whimsical at best, and decorated with far too much well-meaning but ultimately empty rhetoric. An official apology would be a strong first step.

• (1120)

Initiating further original and comprehensive cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of veterans; applying the insurance principle to all military service, including the mandate to care for veterans' children in the Veterans Well-being Act; implementing a reverse onus on disability claims; and taking our rehabilitation out of the hands of for-profit contractors would be a good second step.

Belief in the cause of our sacrifice is central to our identity, rehabilitation and integration into society after military service. The world's morality and regimes may change; what cannot change is our belief that the government system and rights—for which we gave so much—truly, meaningfully and substantially value our sacrifice with more than words.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bruyca.

Let's go to Mr. Christopher Banks for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Banks.

Mr. Christopher Banks (Sergeant (Retired), As an Individual): Thank you for welcoming me to testify once again.

For the record, my name is Christopher Banks, and I retired as a sergeant after 20 years in the Canadian army.

I joined in 2000. By 2003, I was deployed to Camp Maple Leaf in Bosnia, where I served as a peacekeeper. In 2008, I was deployed to FOB Wilson in Kandahar, where we engaged insurgents and dodged IEDs. I returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2019, I was medically released.

Since then, I have studied public policy and administration at the University of Guelph, as well as defence and security at Algonquin College. I am a stakeholder with National Defence and Veterans Affairs. I am a member of the Royal Canadian Military Institute's defence and security study committee and I write for the defence policy journal SITREP.

I joined in an era of transformation. I was able to witness our transformation from a Cold War military into a modern military. After 9/11, the military changed as it adapted to the change in warfare in Afghanistan and as it shook off the cobwebs of administering a fighting war. It continued a long process of change from a uni-capable military to a more capable and dynamic military.

The military changed not only as a result of combat operations but also socially, as did Canadian society. Social standards, training standards and even terminology changed considerably in this time. They say the only constant in life is change, and the military is no exception.

Since my return from Afghanistan, I have sought to help my fellow veterans as an advocate. I advocate in two ways.

The first is that I help veterans connect to the resources they need, whether by engaging directly with them or by speaking to veterans groups about my journey and the importance of self-care.

Second, I bring my experience and knowledge to the change-makers by engaging with legislators and policy-makers on behalf of all veterans and serving military personnel.

On the matter at hand, I want to be clear: I am not a Persian Gulf veteran. I was asked to testify because I am a combat veteran, or what is being described by some in these meetings as a “war service veteran”. I have followed the previous meetings on this subject and concluded that at the heart of what they are asking for is the same hurt and irritation that all of Canada's veterans feel. The erosion of benefits over time is no stranger to anyone who has donned a uniform, nor is the dragging of feet for projects that don't secure a re-election. This is the reality for Canada's veterans and our serving military. Those who have worn the uniform know all too well the feeling of being taken for granted.

Commemoration and recognition are important to all veterans, and we Afghan veterans have our own demands: the monument, which has become politicized; the Victoria Cross that was denied to Jess Larochelle; and the combat action badge that is teased every couple of years. Veterans of all demographics demand a reversal of the erosion of benefits and services; the follow-up study for the Partners in Canadian Veterans Rehabilitation Services, the PCVRS contract; ensuring that benefits are easy to access and in line with the ever-increasing cost of living; and hiring more case managers and adjudicators at Veterans Affairs to eliminate the devastating wait times.

I'm happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Banks.

I invite Mr. Michael Blois, from the Canadian Afghanistan War Veterans Association, to address us by video conference for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Mr. Blois.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Blois (Lawyer, Veteran, Canadian Afghanistan War Veterans Association): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the committee for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you this morning.

My name is Mike Blois. I served in the Canadian Forces from 2000 until 2011.

I joined the army at the age of 17 and wanted to do nothing else with my life but serve and fight for my country. I served in the Royal Canadian Regiment. I'm immensely proud of the accomplishments my regiment and my fellow Royals completed during my time in the military.

I was wounded in Afghanistan on January 29, 2007. This ushered in the end of my military career, much to my displeasure. I was medically released in 2011. I then went to law school and have become a partner at Diamond and Diamond Lawyers LLP, where I'm fortunate to be able to use my experience to help injured people put their lives back together after being injured.

I'm also afforded the opportunity with my law firm and my partners to help other veterans, on a pro bono basis, with their appeals to Veterans Affairs or other legal matters. We also put them in touch with other legal experts if their needs are outside of our scope of practice.

As you're all aware, 20,000-plus Canadians fought in the war in Afghanistan, all of whom would refer to each other as combat veterans. As such, the designation from special duty area to wartime service, outside of any implications that may come from benefits—I think the first witness outlined quite well that probably very limited, if any, changes will come in the benefits—is nothing but a semantic change. It fails to address the real issues faced by Afghan veterans today. Again, I think the second witness did a great job of outlining what those are.

The Prime Minister of this country, prior to being elected as the Prime Minister, stated that no veteran should have to sue the government for benefits that they're entitled to, but that's had to happen many times since he has become Prime Minister.

In my capacity as a lawyer, I've represented a class of Afghanistan war veterans suing Veterans Affairs Canada and the government for failing to meet their own policies and time frames. The wait times that Afghanistan veterans suffer while waiting to get benefits is unacceptable, and nothing seems to change. In this lawsuit, we were successful in obtaining certification and are now in the appeals process.

Afghanistan veterans have fought the most recent war in our nation's history and, unfortunately, have to continue to fight for the benefits that we're entitled to from the government that sent us to that war.

I'm coming before you today to discuss changes that should have been done at the outset of a war and, as Sean stated at the beginning, probably should have happened as far back as the end of the 1940s. All the problems that have flown from there are nothing but fluff on the outside of the real issues that veterans and Afghanistan veterans are facing today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to start the first round of questions with six minutes each.

I invite Mr. Blake Richards to start that round.

• (1130)

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

First of all, thank you to each of you for your service to our country and for your testimony today.

I'll start with you, Mr. Blois.

There are a lot of issues that veterans deal with when it comes to the bureaucratic nightmare that's Veterans Affairs. The government often downplays those issues. It says it's trying really hard and that the issues are complicated. Even if we give some leeway and say that in fact some of these issues are complicated, there are still a lot of friction points that veterans deal with when dealing with Veterans Affairs. There are still a lot of delays. There are a lot of issues.

Aside from that, it seems like there's this inability for Veterans Affairs to be able to get just the simple things right—things like commemoration and things like recognition. All three of you mentioned these things a little in your opening statements. For you, as an Afghanistan veteran, there is this monument situation that just seems to never get resolved.

When Veterans Affairs gets these commemoration, recognition and respect pieces wrong—frankly, respect is the most important part—and when it misses them, how does that make you feel as a veteran?

Mr. Michael Blois: I'm not trying to overstate it, but it is like a knife in the heart.

When you join, you join with the understanding that when you sign up, you could put your life on the line, and there is at least a belief and a tacit understanding that the government will be there for you for the same thing.

Commemoration should be the easiest thing we do. As Sean said, putting Afghanistan on cenotaphs is a no-brainer. Getting a monument for a war that is in our recent collective memory, for which the average veteran ranges from their late thirties to their early sixties, should be a no-brainer and it should be done.

When these things aren't done, it feels like somebody is at best ignorant of how you feel and at worst indifferent to what went on and what we did. The horrors of war and the impacts of war don't change from generation to generation. Watching somebody die in front of you or having to take a life doesn't change, and the impact of that doesn't change, so the commemoration shouldn't be any different, and it should be done easily. When it's not, it hurts twice as much.

Mr. Blake Richards: You said that very eloquently. It's a disgrace, in my opinion, that we're in that situation.

On top of that, getting services, getting benefits and getting claims dealt with are challenges. That's the other aspect, as Mr. Bruyea said in his opening remarks. There are two sides to this, and it seems like we have a government getting them both wrong.

You mentioned in your opening remarks being involved in this class action lawsuit that's currently being dealt with. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about that.

First of all, how does it make you feel when, as a veteran, you are now working with other veterans and you have to represent other veterans when the government is opposing you in court, rather than trying to find a way to help?

I know you tried all other avenues to raise these concerns outside of court before going there. How does it make you feel when you have to actually go to court because you can't get the assistance that veterans need without doing so?

Mr. Michael Blois: It feels like the Shakespearean quote, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends". That's the way it feels. It feels like we're going back to war and back into battle. Instead of fighting a foreign entity, we're fighting the government.

In a way, during those arguments in court, as sad as it is, I'm glad that no other veterans came to witness them. If they'd had to hear the arguments of the government, it would have been enraging for them, because the delay in benefits is a joke. It's astonishing that veterans have to wait 50 weeks or 60 weeks.

When the government sets a timetable for veterans and says, "This is the time frame. When you complete your application, in 16 weeks we'll give you a decision," veterans are okay with that. They get that it takes time. However, when you set the goalposts, you should meet them or at least get close, and the government is not even doing that.

It's very disheartening. Really, the reason I became a lawyer... I never wanted to be a lawyer in my whole life. I wanted to be in the infantry my whole life. I never wanted to be a lawyer. I became a lawyer because I wanted to do what I'm doing. This class action lawsuit was the motivating factor for me, because I knew the government wasn't going to change its tune and wasn't going to do anything, despite our trying our best to get them to.

We had to take them to court. They continue to fight us tooth and nail every step of the way.

• (1135)

Mr. Blake Richards: I hear that.

Thankfully, people like you are out there, ready to fight. You became a lawyer to do it, but the fact that you had to and the fact that you felt that it was necessary just makes me absolutely sad.

I'll offer you the opportunity, if there's anything else you'd like to tell us, to share about the lawsuit and the basis behind it. The idea that people are waiting 50 or 60 weeks is ridiculous.

Are there any other comments you want to make on the lawsuit?

The Chair: Mr. Blois, you have only 15 seconds left to respond to that.

Mr. Michael Blois: The math used by the government to calculate its ability to meet its deadlines is.... If the Canadian population could hear what the government has said, they would be disgusted. It meets the deadline in only 46% of the cases, but it ignores 20% of the most complex cases.

However, the government doesn't know which cases in the application process are in that 20%, so that 46% figure of meeting the deadline is complete fiction. The government has no idea of how many people meet that deadline.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now let's go to Mr. Randeep Sarai for six minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I want to welcome the class that's here from Kanata.

I'll go to you, Mr. Bruyea. You've brought a group of students with you to watch the testimony here at our committee meeting today. I think a key aspect of commemoration is ensuring that young people and students have the opportunity to learn about Canadian history and the veterans who have served Canada in the past and all the way up to this day. Would you agree with that statement?

As a follow-up, do you have thoughts on other ways to encourage commemoration opportunities or learning materials that can help in this regard?

Mr. Sean Bruyea: Thank you for the question, Mr. Sarai. I think that's a bigger question than maybe I would originally have anticipated.

I'm very grateful that the students are here. One of the differences we've heard in some testimony between World War II and current operations is about the knowledge of the public around them. It provides a degree of social support that people can validate that service. They can understand the struggles that people are going through, because many families were dealing with veterans who were suffering at the time. We know from research that the lack of social support is one of the number one predictors that people will develop post-traumatic stress disorder. It has very real and tangible damage when we don't socially support our veterans.

I think research is also starting to show that when people develop PTSD, they fail to seek out social supports for obvious reasons— isolation, fear, anxiety, super-low self-esteem. It's a vicious circle that really needs to be interrupted at a national level, and not just once a year. It's an awareness that all Canadians need to have in order to understand what's being sacrificed on their behalf.

That's why I submitted to the committee the table that was developed in hand with Veterans Affairs. It's to show that the cost of war is more than just the official statistics of deceased in theatre or wounded in theatre; we're talking about casualties that develop years later. They are casualties of war that are not reported. I think the public needs to learn about that. I think getting the students involved at this level of democracy also helps them to participate and understand that we all have a right to speak our mind. We all have a right to bring our issues forward.

I would also say that one component, if you don't mind my adding one more thing, is that we put enormous efforts into bringing a Canadian citizen into the military and training them not just physically to do the tasks but also mentally. It is the most powerful, legally sanctioned indoctrination that's allowed in our nation, yet we expect that those veterans, when they finish their term of service.... Most of them finish before 20 years and have a second career ahead of them. They are severely handicapped because they have not been de-indoctrinated. We go to boot camp to indoctrinate them, and they've spent years in their careers thinking like the military. The civilian world doesn't work that way. To succeed in this in the civilian world, among the social supports we need is a comprehensive program to de-indoctrinate them.

Community leaders could join in this, and business leaders. We could have a boot camp for de-indoctrination to make them feel welcome. Maybe it could be run on weekends or maybe it could be run full time. It could be a system that allows these veterans to feel that they belong to the nation for which they sacrificed.

• (1140)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Mr. Banks, would you like to add to that?

Mr. Christopher Banks: I would say that the military is probably the most complex beast in the federal government, if not all of Canada. As a culture, we're vastly different from pretty much every other culture in Canada. We're the only one that's geared toward lethality. On that note alone, we are very cryptic and very hard for outsiders to read.

While I can acknowledge that the government does a lot of good work in offering up commemoration around Remembrance Day and the materials that the schools will get for educational purposes, it's limited to remembrance season and Veterans' Week, but we as veterans exist every single day of the year.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you—and rightly so.

Mr. Blois, did you want to add to that?

Mr. Michael Blois: I think Sean had some really great points there.

When it comes to the mental component of being in the military and the conditioning that is put on soldiers to meet deadlines, to meet obligations, being told “You're going to be on the line of departure at this time, and you're going to go here, and you're going to do that” were the kinds of orders I received in Afghanistan. It was “You're going to get to this line, and you're going to move from this location to this location, and you're going to kill the enemy in be-

tween”, and there's no exception. There's no minute off. You're there.

When you have that level of expectation put on you, veterans naturally assume that those who are putting those expectations on them are going to hold themselves to the same standard. We know that they don't even come close.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

I would like to welcome one of our colleagues, Mr. Dan Muys, to the committee.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Luc Desilets for six minutes.

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

Hello, colleagues.

Welcome to the students from the Kanata Montessori school. I used to be a school principal. I am very pleased to see young people in attendance today.

Mr. Bruyey, my first question is for you.

You mentioned a figure earlier. We have nearly finished our study and that is the first time that I, in any case, have heard a figure quantifying what making adjustments means. You said \$18 billion.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Bruyey: That's correct.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Okay.

Can you tell us exactly where that figure comes from? Who came out with it and who conducted that study?

[*English*]

Mr. Sean Bruyey: The Parliamentary Budget Officer—I do not know at whose behest—in 2019, when the pension for life was announced, decided to compare the regimes of benefits pre-2006, which was under the Pension Act; post-2006 to 2019, up to the pension for life, which was called the new veterans charter; and then the pension for life afterwards.

In those three cohorts, he looked at the veterans who were anticipated to apply for benefits between 2019 and 2024. He then did the costing, principally focused upon the disability, pain and suffering compensation, because the income loss is the same for all veterans. The veterans who came before 2006 are on the income loss program, as they are up until 2019 and afterwards. They would all have received benefits from improvements to income loss.

The big difference was—we're talking about apples and oranges—income loss versus pain and suffering payments. The courts recognize that distinction. Focusing on the pain and suffering payments, he looked at that cohort of veterans, and he found that over their lifetimes, were they to be paid under the Pension Act, it would cost around \$50 billion to pay for their benefits. However, under the 2006 program, if I'm not mistaken, he anticipated that the present clients.... I'm sorry: It was both present clients and the future cohort that would be \$50 billion.

Under scenario two, which was the new veterans charter or the Veterans Well-being Act, it would be \$29 billion, and the pension for life would be \$32 billion.

That's an \$18-billion differential between pension for life and if they were covered under Pension Act payments. It's quite significant.

• (1145)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: What conclusion do you draw from that?

It is a large amount though, there's no question about it. Is that amount the reason for the lack of equity between the regimes?

[English]

Mr. Sean Bruyeya: I think that's the number one reason that there's not equity. We have other issues, such as the recognition component, the social support component and the re-establishment benefits after World War II, but in terms of that number, that's a lightning rod. The pain and suffering component has been a lightning rod since the lump sum was first created in 2006.

In the words of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, "From the perspective of the veteran, virtually all clients would be better off if they were to receive the benefits of the Pension Act".

What was most notable about the transition from the Veterans Well-Being Act to the pension for life—it's still called the Veterans Well-being Act—was that in the 2019 stage, they eliminated new applicants from receiving the critical impairment allowance supplement. Only 200 veterans receive that right now, because new applicants were prevented from applying, but this is the allowance that goes to the most disabled. The most disabled veterans were going to be less well off under pension for life to the tune of \$300,000 each, over their lifetimes.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: What happened to you is interesting, but unfortunate.

Did you suffer physically or psychologically when you left the army?

[English]

Mr. Sean Bruyeya: Yes, I did.

Quite importantly, the 1990s was called the "dark decade" for a reason. I remember returning from the Gulf War; I was sent back early due to combat stress reaction. I showed up in front of the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist said to me, "By the way, everything that you say to me I will report to your commanding officer", so be-

ing an astute little young ambitious officer, I kept my mouth shut, and he put in a diagnosis of jet lag.

I kept that diagnosis of jet lag for many years until I realized that I truly had PTSD, but it wasn't until after I was released. I wasn't medically released because as I sat with the medical doctor with over 13 physical and psychological ailments on my medical release file, he came in jokingly and said, "Is that all? You're good to go." That was my support when I left the military.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you for your candour.

In your opinion, should special consideration be given to persons who have been deployed, whether to Afghanistan or during the Gulf War, for instance, or should we just say, rather foolishly, that war is war?

[English]

Mr. Sean Bruyeya: In fact, I would agree with you 100% that war is war. I think trying to create different regimes for different periods of conflict just creates confusion in the public. It creates great animosity between veterans, and those sorts of distinctions should not exist. We can maybe distinguish between combat and non-combat, but I would think that would be the degree of distinction.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

We will now return to a committee member who is joining us via Zoom.

[English]

We have with us Ms. Rachel Blaney.

It's your turn for six minutes. Please go ahead.

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

I want to thank all of our witnesses, first of all, for their service to the country and their testimony here today.

I also want to say hello and welcome to all the students. I know that Wilfred's out there. I'll just let you know that your dad said really good things about you.

I'm going to start with Mr. Bruyeya.

I really appreciate your testimony and found it quite horrifying to hear that you were diagnosed with jet lag. I'm going to probably never forget that for the rest of my life. Thank you for sharing that.

I want to get one thing clear. Have you sent to the committee the report that you were citing earlier? I just want to make sure that it's been sent to the committee.

• (1150)

Mr. Sean Bruyey: Do you mean the Parliamentary Budget Officer report, Ms. Blaney?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes.

Mr. Sean Bruyey: I will make sure that they get it, but I have not sent it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: If you could do that, that would be great. I just want to make sure that the information can be included in the report.

You also talked about animosity between veterans, which I think is one of the challenges that we don't hear enough about. It concerns me greatly, because when you take on that role of service, you want people to feel part of a team. That's part of what it is to serve in the military. For people to feel animosity, I think, is unfortunate.

I want to get a little bit of clarity. You talked about combat and non-combat. I think that one of the challenges that we're hearing really clearly in this study is that those categories are very important and that how they're being dealt with right now is harmful. I'm wondering if you could talk about the combat versus non-combat distinction. Is it your recommendation that this be the change?

Mr. Sean Bruyey: I would just like to clarify. Do I agree with the distinction? No; I would understand it.

If we take the precedent from World War II, what happened was that in 1946, the Pension Act was changed so that people who originally were merely stationed in Canada were covered under, if you remember, the compensation principle. There was such rancour and misunderstanding about what was going on that the government actually changed the Pension Act and said that all veterans who were stationed back home would be covered under the insurance principle.

If we go to, for instance, 9/11, under the infamous document 1447 that Veterans Affairs has about the insurance principle, they made it so that going forward, all veterans that were on training would be covered under the insurance principle when they were training for an SDA, a special duty area, even during their downtime on weekends.

The fact is that when we join the military, we're training for SDAs from the day we put on that uniform. I really think that there shouldn't be any distinction. I think that the benefits that are given for disability will compensate for that distinction. I think that when all of us are in the military, we're heavily indoctrinated and heavily disabled to re-transition back into civilian life, no matter what our disabilities.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I keep hearing about the differences between the Pension Act and the Well-being Act. I'm wondering if you could explain that a little bit. What are the economic losses? What are your thoughts on that?

I guess this is the last thing that I would ask. Thank you to the many witnesses for trying to make this clear in my brain. This is a huge issue to wrap my head around, so I really appreciate the patience. Should we do something so that the Pension Act and the Veterans Well-being Act are harmonized so that people who serve

together get the same benefits? Is that a solution that we could look at?

Mr. Sean Bruyey: Certainly.

I think when we compare the benefits, all veterans from basically World War I right up until 2006 were covered under the Pension Act. Prior to that, there were other lifelong pensions in place.

There is one important aspect for a committee that cares about families, spouses and children: They were always compensated separately under the Pension Act. That changed in 2006, and since then, the situation has not improved. There is no extra money for a married person or a person with dependants or a person with children. In order to harmonize the benefits, yes, we know what the costs would be, and Parliament would not be happy about approving that, but it's an easy fix if we ignore the money part. All we have to do is replace the pain and suffering compensation under the Veterans Well-being Act with the Pension Act, and there, it's done.

• (1155)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you. That is so helpful.

I want to go to Mr. Banks really quickly.

What could the government be doing to commemorate Persian Gulf and Afghanistan veterans? I think it's really important, because what I hear again and again is this reality of feeling excluded. What do we need to do now with all of the tensions to take that next step?

Mr. Christopher Banks: I'll speak briefly to the Persian Gulf because, as I said, I'm not a Persian Gulf veteran. When I was doing some research before coming in today, I noticed that there is not a monument in Canada dedicated to the Persian Gulf mission. There are monuments dedicated to smaller missions, but 4,000 Canadians went to the Persian Gulf, and there's no monument. Give them a monument. I mean, here on the Afghanistan side, we're hammering for a monument. Give them a monument too.

There's another thing that I mentioned briefly in my opening statement. I talked about the combat action declaration that is teased every couple of years. We're talking about war service among different generations of veterans. Why not just apply that? That would give the recognition to those who crossed the line, who went outside the line and actually engaged the enemy. We've been talking about it for decades.

I think Mr. Blois was the one who said that commemoration is incredibly easy, and the fact that the government's dragging its feet on it is indicative.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Colleagues, you know that we have another panel, but I will allow just one question for each group, a question of one minute, to close this panel.

I don't know if Mr. Richards would like to take this minute to ask a question.

Please go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I'll ask each of you how it would make you feel as a veteran who fought for this country, who was prepared to give your life for this country, to know that during the recent D-Day commemorations in France, there were no Canadian flags as part of the ceremony?

I'll let you start, Mr. Banks.

Mr. Christopher Banks: I really don't know how to respond to that. I didn't have that answer prepared. It's gross, I guess.

Again, just to reiterate the last thing I said in my last intervention, commemoration is incredibly easy. Why is the government so bad at it? We're talking about a delegation and some flags. What would that have cost, \$20,000? Come on.

Mr. Blake Richards: Go ahead, Mr. Bruyca.

Mr. Sean Bruyca: Thank you for the question.

When we joined the military, it's not just about the time period that we served. When we belong to a unit, there is a history associated with it. We've heard about the mention of honours. Even if we're not part of another unit, we feel a part of that huge military...I won't say family, but it's a huge military closeness that occurs at a deep community and a deep emotional level.

When something historical is not honoured, it affects us in the present. D-Day was part of our history, part of our legacy. Being in the military is a legacy of people that have sacrificed before us and people that sacrifice after us. We are deeply attached to that, and it wounds us deeply when the proper commemoration does not occur.

The Chair: Go ahead quickly, Mr. Blois, if you'd like to, please.

Mr. Michael Blois: To piggyback on Sean's comment there, one of the things I'm immensely proud of is that for the rest of my regiment's history, there will be Afghanistan on the colours, and I know I contributed, and I know everybody who was with me who contributed to put that on that flag. It means a great deal to us.

However, when I look at all of those other battle honours on there, like the Pursuit to Mons, Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Ortona, I don't look at that and say, "That's somebody else." Those are my brothers. Those are my sisters. Those are the people who I fought with; we're the same. If I see a veteran who fought in Korea, we look at each other and we're family and we see each other the same way. When the government can't do something as simple as recognize the sacrifice that our brothers and our sisters made on maybe one of the most monumental days in world history, it's a bloody disgrace.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you. Colleagues, you know that I'm trying to keep us on time. Try to keep it to one minute.

Mr. Miao, please go ahead.

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): I will try to keep it very short.

Thank you for being here.

I'll ask a very general question of all of you. Is there a general difference between the risk and injury assumed by CAF personnel deployed in official wartime service versus special duty service?

Mr. Bruyca, you can start.

Mr. Sean Bruyca: Hopefully you guys can refer to the data that was supplied by Veterans Affairs that shows the comparison. It's not a one-for-one comparison between wartime service and the special duty areas that we talk about, but we can see the immense cost of serving in so-called peacetime and so-called peacekeeping missions.

Although the deceased in-area may not be the same because of changes in warfare and combat medicine that are occurring and the ability to evacuate casualties as quickly as possible and save them, the lifelong casualties—the ones that develop afterwards that aren't officially recognized on cenotaphs, monuments, and books of remembrance—are comparable in every way with wartime service. Psychological injury and physical injury are things we need to start commemorating and respecting, because those people are with us now and they need to know that they're being recognized for what they live every day.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Miao.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for a minute. You have time to ask one of the witnesses a quick question.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Blois, you said earlier that the government does not even follow its own policies.

Could you elaborate on that? We have been through this before with the National Monument to Canada's Mission in Afghanistan.

[English]

Mr. Michael Blois: The time frames that Veterans Affairs sets out are on the completion of an application, which includes all of the medical documentation that usually is sourced by only the veteran and provided to Veterans Affairs. On completion of that—and it is determined solely by Veterans Affairs when that's done—the time frame is 16 weeks for Veterans Affairs to make a decision on an initial application for benefits. For somebody who is putting in their application for the first time, saying they were either injured in the service and it was years ago or whenever, that 16-week time frame is what Veterans Affairs tells the veteran, and we know it's never met or very rarely met, and veterans wait years. The problem that veterans run into is that you cannot get benefits and treatment for your medical condition that you're putting your application in for until that decision has been made by Veterans Affairs.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The last question is from Ms. Blaney.

Please go ahead for one minute.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

My question is for Sean. We've heard testimony that the Pension Act covers economic losses. Do you have any thoughts that you want to share about that?

Mr. Sean Bruyca: The government has been pushing that narrative ever since they created the new veterans charter in 2006. I would just bring us back to the words of John Todd, who was the designer of the Pension Act in 1919 and was one of the first three pension commissioners.

He wrote:

Those who give public service do so not for themselves alone but for the society of which they are a part. Therefore, each citizen should share equally in the suffering which war brings to his nation. War may make citizens suffer in property or in person. Compensation for property loss lies outside the province of a war pension.

A war pension does not compensate for economic loss through destruction of property, or interruption of business. A war pension compensates only for detriment, bodily or mental, to the persons of those who serve their country in war.

I would also add the small matter of the billion-dollar lawsuit that was based upon deducting Pension Act payments from income, the Manuge case, and the final payments in 2013, wherein the courts recognized that the Pension Act was not for income loss.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to stop right here for the first panel.

On behalf of members of the committee, I'd like to say thank you for your testimony, service and continued advocacy.

[Translation]

We have heard from two witnesses today who appeared as individuals: Sean Bruyca, a retired captain and Air Force intelligence officer, and Christopher Banks, a retired sergeant.

We also heard from someone from the Canadian Afghanistan War Veterans Association, Michel Blois, who is a lawyer and veteran.

Once again, I want to thank those who have been with us for the first part of the meeting, and wish the students in attendance a good afternoon at school.

We will suspend for a few minutes to welcome the next witnesses.

- (1200) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1210)

The Chair: We will now resume the meeting.

As you know, we are conducting a study on the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans and reviewing wartime service.

For the second part of our meeting, we have a new group of witnesses who are with us in the room.

[English]

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

We have with us for the second hour the Honourable Rear-Admiral Rebecca Patterson, senator. As individuals, we have retired Colonel Mark Gasparotto, Afghanistan veteran, combat sub-unit commander, and retired Lieutenant-Colonel Dean Tremblay, Afghanistan veteran, combat sub-unit commander.

As you know, you're going to have five minutes for your opening statement. After that, members of the committee will ask you some questions.

It's my pleasure to ask the Honourable Senator Patterson to start for five minutes.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson (Senator, Ontario, CSG) : Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Good afternoon. For those who may not know me, I'm Senator Rebecca Patterson. Before taking this role, I served as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces for 34 years. I was deployed in various theatres of operation, including the Persian Gulf, Somalia and Afghanistan, providing operational-level medical planning and support to Canadian Armed Forces personnel deployed across the world.

I'm here as an individual and a veteran.

On the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in January 1991, armed conflict broke out in the Persian Gulf. Canada committed one Canadian field hospital to support the British Army's 33rd Field Hospital in support of an anticipated ground war. Less than 24 hours after hostilities broke out, I became a member of 1 Canadian Field Hospital as a critical care nurse. I, along with about 350 other medical personnel of all occupations, signallers, logisticians and a platoon of Royal Canadian Regiment infantry soldiers, was brought to CFB Petawawa in Ontario to conduct pre-deployment training and prepare equipment.

The full complement of the field hospital arrived in Saudi Arabia by mid-February 1991. Due to the rapid evolution of the ground war, along with safety concerns about transporting personnel in a war zone, only a complement to the field hospital, along with our British counterparts, was deployed to the forward location, approximately 40 kilometres from the Saudi-Kuwait-Iraqi border.

The duties of forward-deployed field hospital personnel included surgical and medical treatment of allied soldiers and wounded Iraqi soldiers. Eventually, our RCR platoon was tasked with helping to manage the influx of Iraqi detainees. They were also responsible for escorting wounded Iraqis through the treatment process. We returned home in late March 1991. You can accurately say that 1 Canadian Field Hospital was physically closest to the ground campaign.

Since the adoption of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, Canada has formally declared war only once, back in 1939, when King—on the advice of his Canadian ministers—brought Canada into the Second World War. Therefore, Canadians went to war and de facto became war veterans. Canada has not formally declared war on another nation since the Charter of the United Nations was signed in 1945. Despite this, Canadian military forces have engaged in conflict areas around the world as part of police actions, peacekeeping, peacemaking or any other type of intervention on the direction of Canada.

As Michel Rossignol aptly noted in a 1992 paper prepared for us here in Parliament, the Canadian Forces Act of 1950 allowed the armed forces to be placed on active service by the Governor in Council, advised by the Minister of National Defence, not only when Canada's security was threatened but also when—I'm going to underline this—collective action was taken under the UN charter, NATO or any other collective defence agency. In fact, placing military on active service is done for bureaucratic reasons and for access to benefits. As noted by the Minister of National Defence in 1951, it relates to the application of the insurance principle. That has been very well covered by my predecessors.

From the Cold War to the modern day, placing military forces on active service has been required to ensure they are ready to engage at a moment's notice anywhere conflicts arise around the world. While the “when” to place troops on active service effectively changed with the introduction of that act, it unintentionally created a loophole for future veterans to be ineligible for the same benefits as those who served in active service during the Second World War and eventually Korea.

The next bureaucratic choice was the requirement to designate a theatre of operations as an SDA, as well as consult with the Minis-

ter of Veterans Affairs on benefits, and so the Canadians who served in these theatres of operation are not considered war veterans.

We must ask ourselves whether the current definitions and criteria for veterans' benefits and commemorative recognition truly recognize the realities of modern conflict. Canadians have served, been injured and have died on behalf of our country since the Boer War. I ask you whether one death or injury is worth more or less than another, based on time. As yet—you've heard many other fabulous testimonies—we currently have a system with stark differences between how veterans are treated and how they are commemorated, depending on the nature of the conflict they served in and where it took place.

I have a number of recommendations that I will touch on very quickly, then I will conclude.

The first recommendation is to consider a definition of war as a subcategory consideration under “special duty area” within applicable acts and regulations. You've heard about the Pension Act and disequilibrium.

• (1215)

VAC should conduct a study, including the use of a veterans round table, to modernize and harmonize these two acts.

The inequities, as we know, go beyond just the veterans themselves. We heard this committee come forward in 2023 with a push to repeal the “gold digger” clause about marriage over 60. This must continue, because modern veterans live beyond the age of 60 years, and they're independent adults.

Finally, our families also serve. I recommend that we consider them an extension of service and call for the implementation of the 2021 Office of the Veterans Ombudsman's recommendation that mental health treatment benefits be available to family members, in their own right, for conditions related to their allied military service.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now let's go to Colonel Gasparotto for five minutes, please.

Colonel (Retired) Mark Gasparotto (Afghanistan Veteran Combat Sub-unit Commander, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thank you for this opportunity to present my insights on training and, ultimately, commanding Canadian Armed Forces personnel in combat. I was asked to present these insights in order to provide the realities of military service with a particular focus on duty, unlimited liability, fighting spirit and discipline.

The CAF's primary mission is to detect, deter and defend against threats to or attacks on Canada. As such, military personnel are unique as citizens. Once we voluntarily enrol, we are the only ones who are sanctioned to manage violence on behalf of the state and to use force or the threat thereof in the pursuit of national interests and political objectives. Having pulled the trigger and taken several enemies' lives, this is not an abstract concept for me.

To achieve the CAF's unique mission within Canadian society, there are certain professional expectations. I provide my interpretations of four that are most relevant to this testimony.

Duty means the mission comes first, always. Service to Canada before self means that when we enrol, we subordinate ourselves to the team, the unit and the greater good. That means sacrifice, a price paid for by our members willingly—and their families, sometimes unwillingly.

Unlimited liability means the legal requirement for CAF members to accept that in the process of their duties, they may have to risk their lives or the lives of those they lead. I've buried a soldier, and I continue to know more who struggle with physical injuries and mental health conditions, so many of us are still living the sacrifice.

Fighting spirit means we must have a warrior culture and ethos. We must be able to operate across all planes—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual—to close with and destroy the enemy. To quote General Rick Hillier, “We're not the public service of Canada. We're not just another department. We're the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.” We manage violence on all of your behalf. Discipline and the rule of law means following lawful orders from the chain of command, orders that may put our lives at risk or may require us to injure or kill enemy combatants. Therefore, our great leadership challenge is to prepare ourselves and our people to engage in the grim matters of warfare without losing our humanity.

Now I have an example from combat operations in Kandahar, a so-called “special duty area”.

In summer 2006 the Taliban, with many hundreds of heavily armed soldiers, attempted to seize Kandahar. That threat led to Operation Medusa, Canada's largest combat operation since the Korean War and, at the time, NATO's largest combat operation in its history. While we were equipped with exceptional armoured fighting vehicles, we did not have any breaching assets to defeat the extensive Taliban defences, so we rented yellow civilian bulldozers. My operators thought this was a crazy plan and expressed their concerns based on the obvious significant risks. We mitigated the risks as best as we could and, regardless of the residual dangers, they were ordered to breach the Taliban defences. They had no choice in the matter.

In the end, we were successful. However, one member of my squadron was blown up three times while operating heavy equipment outside the wire, earning him two sacrifice medals for his injuries. His name is Lance Hooper. He's now a warrant officer. To me, by embracing unlimited liability, Lance is the embodiment of duty and of how discipline is the foundation of fighting spirit.

In conclusion, enrolment in the CAF is voluntary. Once enrolled, CAF members must serve until released, in accordance with the regulations; have numerous obligations of service that do not have civilian equivalents; and have an obligation to respect, uphold and obey the chain of command. Training and socialization during times of service are designed to cultivate a habit of obedience and respect for authority, which are essential for conducting effective and efficient military operations during active service.

Combat operations in Kandahar, Afghanistan, cost the lives of many CAF personnel and involved the application of significant violence against a determined enemy. Calling it a “special duty area” rings hollow when judged against the realities on the ground.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gasparotto.

Now let's go to retired Lieutenant-Colonel Dean Tremblay for five minutes, please.

Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Dean Tremblay (Afghanistan Veteran Combat Sub-unit Commander, As an Individual): Good afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you as a witness to share my experiences as a tactical combat team commander in Afghanistan from September 2008 to April 2009.

Operating from Forward Operating Base Frontenac, which is located slightly north of Kandahar city, my core team was based on an armoured reconnaissance squadron with attachments from the infantry, combat engineers, artillery and other specialists. Our initial core strength was 145 personnel. I emphasize the word “initial” because, sadly, four of my soldiers were killed in action doing what Canada asked them to do.

It was on this occasion that I deployed with these amazing Canadians outside the wire on a daily basis to conduct combat operations.

I would like to quickly highlight two critical takeaways from my experience in Afghanistan that I believe are very relevant to the discussion of active service of Canadian Forces members.

The first is leadership in combat. During my career, I deployed in several missions, each with its own inherent challenges and dangers. For me, being a combat commander in Afghanistan, with all of its complexities and the responsibility for making daily life-and-death decisions, often void of all information, was the most powerful, professional and emotional experience of my life.

We were at war. We were engaged in daily operations against a determined and armed enemy. Every day we were at risk of being targeted, wounded or killed. We were expected to do the same to our enemy, if legally called upon.

My decisions, the way I led and employed my team to achieve our mission, and ultimately the orders I issued to my soldiers would have an immediate as well as a lifelong impact on every single one of them.

In the performance of our mission, we suffered significant casualties. My core team suffered 26% casualties due to enemy action. This included four soldiers killed and 34 seriously injured. Of those, 22 soldiers who were critically wounded were repatriated to Canada. These figures do not begin to reflect those who continue to suffer with seen and unseen injuries many years after our deployment.

To put this into an operational perspective, at staff college, where military officers are trained in operational planning, we used wartime figures that suggest that after a unit has suffered 10% to 15% casualties, it is deemed combat-ineffective and subsequently removed from the front line for reconstitution. In Afghanistan, however, there was no front line. The enemy was all around us. Reconstitution never fully occurred, despite our casualties.

I share these statistics not as a scorecard or to glorify casualties but to highlight the immediate and long-term human impact of war on our people.

We, as leaders, have a very direct and significant responsibility to our personnel as we make life-altering decisions in these unpredictable and dangerous war zones. Leadership is not only about achieving operational or tactical success; it's also about having compassion and enduring commitment to those we are responsible for and accountable to while in the fight and also long afterward. In fact, the health and wellness of our personnel is 100% part of mission success.

The other is unlimited liability. Throughout my years of service to Canada, I proudly accepted unlimited liability, which means I could be lawfully ordered into harm's way under conditions that might lead to loss of life. As regular force members on active service, we never questioned this expectation. When deploying to operations in support of Government of Canada commitments, regardless of the threat environment, unlimited liability remained a constant. We had an obligation to obey lawful orders, but this did not prevent us from asking constructive questions to clarify intent, plan and prepare our teams, or institute important mitigation strategies to de-risk the mission and protect our personnel's health and well-being. Despite all of this, sadly, bad things can still happen.

During my time in Afghanistan, I did receive lawful orders directing my unit to conduct combat missions that put me and my soldiers at risk. Some missions, sadly, resulted in death. Despite these terrible moments, we continued to conduct operations and perform our duty. We did not close shop to escape the dangers that we were faced with on a daily basis.

These difficult times reinforced the importance of trust within our ranks. We had to trust the person to the left and to the right, the chain of command and, by extension, our country and its national

institutions, to respect, honour and care for our personnel and their families consistently and meaningfully long after the deployment concluded. The experiences of war are not framed by a start and end date. They are enduring for all members and, by extension, their families.

● (1225)

In closing, I'll say that went through long periods of personal doubt and guilt and significant internal reflection to manage my expectations, my experiences and my decisions; to rationalize the long-term impact of our Afghanistan combat mission on my soldiers and my role, good or bad, in their lives; their reintegration post-deployment; and even their pain. Despite this, I never questioned my role as a leader and the necessity to make difficult decisions, nor did I ever question the necessity of unlimited liability because of operational imperatives, legal obligations and moral expectations.

I am grateful that this committee is focused on this important topic. Thank you for your support to our veterans.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Tremblay.

Now we're going to start the first round of questions of six minutes.

Colleagues, you can split your six minutes.

I invite Mrs. Cathy Wagantall to start the round of questions.

Please go ahead.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you all. Your testimony is honestly overpowering to me.

I'm going to ask this, first of all, of the gentlemen. I hear the term "war" used often, yet it doesn't exist anymore, according to legislation. That is my understanding, yet as a civilian I would absolutely put what you just described to me in that category. I sense that you as well would put it in that category.

Concerning these responsibilities of duty and unlimited liability and being required as volunteers to obey the chain of command and all of these things, are they somehow defined differently for the circumstances in which you found yourselves in Afghanistan versus previous war scenarios?

● (1230)

LCol (Ret'd) Dean Tremblay: I think Mark alluded to the term "volunteerism". I think that once you sign up for active service, volunteerism ends. You have that commitment and the obligation to operate within the constraints.

One thing that came to mind as you asked that question was that I wanted to highlight three published ethical obligations that we as Canadian Forces members have when in service to the country and deployed on operations. One is to respect the dignity of all persons. That's pretty straightforward, I believe. Another is to serve Canada before self. Mark rightly highlighted that. Another is to obey and support lawful authority. That's the manner in which you operate at all times, be it domestically or abroad, on operations in service to your country.

When you look at those three published and accepted ethical principles, it's quite clear the way that all of our personnel will operate willingly, knowing that they've made that commitment to each other but also to Canadians and the Government of Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'll broaden it out from there. I appreciate that what I heard were the repercussions of—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, but there is no interpretation.

The Chair: I will make sure—

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I want to move forward with another question. Is there translation now?

The Chair: If I'm speaking in English, do you have any translation yet?

[*Translation*]

I can see that people can hear me clearly when I am speaking French.

[*English*]

The problem is from English to French.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, are you on the right channel?

Mr. Luc Desilets: I am told it is working.

The Chair: Okay.

[*English*]

Mrs. Wagantall, the clock was stopped, so don't worry. You have more than four minutes left.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's awesome. Thank you so much.

You talked about the wounded, those who died in their service, those critically wounded and others. You then shared with us the fact that health and wellness are impacted, truly, for the rest of your life. I have a question I want to ask that is a little sensitive. If you don't want to answer it, that's fine.

Over time, the use of MAID has become more of an awareness within the armed forces. We have heard of soldiers being offered that, even with the clarification that they should not worry and that their families would be taken care of. We've had many take their own lives after coming home. Of course, those circumstances would not have been seen in the same light.

I just need to ask what that brings to your heart and mind in regard to serving your country and coming home and having MAID brought forward.

LCol (Ret'd) Dean Tremblay: I think that when folks deploy to serve their country, they deploy with the belief that they're going to do their job and do what's asked of them, with the mindset that it's their duty and their commitment to Canada. It's their pride in the country and their pride in everything that's related to that. I don't believe they deploy to think about the what-ifs should things go south and go terribly wrong.

I think they deploy with the trust that their colleagues, their leadership and their chain of command—and certainly the institution, the government and the country we represent—support us in what we do. Otherwise, why would we be sent to these different parts of the world?

There's the mindset that if something goes bad on those most terrible days that are unimaginable, they will be taken care of. There's that institutional trust that while we are socialized, if you want to use that term, upon joining the military, you will operate in a certain fashion, with these ethical principles and moral obligations, and you will also have trust in the institution, which extends far beyond the unit you're deploying with. I believe they have that trust in place should those bad moments occur. I think what we're seeing in some of the testimony today is that the trust has been questioned.

Certainly, when you deploy, you know where you're going, generally, and you have that obligation.

● (1235)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: We've heard a lot at this committee about the challenges of seeing discrepancies between what was in the previous act and the one our veterans are under now. Can you give your perspectives on what has happened in that regard and whether you see it as better or worse?

I'll go to Mark and then Senator Patterson.

Col (Ret'd) Mark Gasparotto: I can only speak for myself and anecdotally, based on conversations I have had with my former squadron or other people I've served with.

Certainly, when I needed help, the help was there through Veterans Affairs. Now, I didn't have a complex case, but I have no complaints about the service I received. I have none whatsoever. I thought it was quite seamless. You probably hear all of the bad stories that come in. I think that paints, unfortunately, a victim narrative that all soldiers are broken. That is not the case by far.

While there are still things that need to be fixed—and I can't speak to exactly what those are—I know there has been a real attempt within the armed forces. What I've seen from Veterans Affairs is there's been a real attempt to address some of those things, understanding that there's probably still a way to go.

In terms of the discrepancies between these various policies, I have not lived the impact of those. Perhaps Senator Patterson could fill in the gap there.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: That is why you have a recommendation coming. It shouldn't matter if you served in 2005 and won access to benefits, or in 2007, when we brought in the new charter. When you see one of my recommendations, it needs to be a harmonization in collaboration with a veterans round table to have a look and see what those actually mean.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I now invite Ms. Lisa Hepfner to go ahead for six minutes, please.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to take a moment to thank all of you for being here with us today and for your service to Canada. Thank you as well to the other veterans I see in the room who are here in support.

Senator Patterson, we were speaking earlier in the room. We've been talking a lot at this committee about commemoration and battle honours, which we know are very important to veterans, almost equally important to the compensation they receive. I understand that on Monday you were at a ceremony with my colleague from Kingston and the Islands to present a medal to retired Captain Sean Casey—not the same Sean Casey that we have here at the table with us today.

I understand that there were some takeaways from that event. I'm hoping you can describe those for us, please.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you for the question.

It was a very interesting time in history when we went to the Gulf War. It was the end of the Cold War. We were starting to digitize, I'm going to say, in the most basic ways in the military. Record systems changed. What happened is that when personnel who were tasked to go to the Persian Gulf crisis moved forward, the administrative system didn't catch up.

For someone like Sean Casey—or even me, as it turned out, which I hadn't realized—when we look at a record to see what's to be commemorated and how, it's based on the record that's input by somebody. In Sean Casey's case, it was just completely missed that he actually was on board the ship, on the *Terra Nova*, and was at the Persian Gulf, so he had to fight and say no, he was there. Remember, not everybody had a cellphone they could use to take a photo with a date and time-stamp. It was us with our little cameras, hoping the photo went well. He was missed, and he fought for many years to tell them that no, he was there.

It becomes very hard to prove for people who move around all the time when you're working off a paper copy and someone loses your document somewhere in transferring your information over to a digital copy. In my case, they said I didn't actually serve in Saudi Arabia, but they'd give me credit. I learned that as I was retiring 33 years later.

Why does it matter? It affects how they do calculations of everything from severance pay to your benefits, or in case you got injured. To give you an example, on my record it said I was in Germany. I got an out-of-country credit—woo-hoo—but I didn't get the special duty area credit.

You're going to find that more junior members did not know how to navigate the system. It makes it really impossible for VAC to truly calculate and for DND to figure out if you actually served in the Persian Gulf. I think one thing that can come out of this is that there needs to be special consideration given to screening through the files of people in that early nineties transition period so that we don't end up with Sean Casey being awarded his Gulf medal 33 years later.

• (1240)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: The period of the early nineties really doesn't seem all that long ago to me, but the technology was dramatically different. I appreciate your bringing that perspective.

I understand that you are participating in our women veterans council assessment board. As far as I understand it, and correct me if I'm wrong, this is a new board, the first of its kind, and it's just getting under way this month.

Tell us more about your participation and what you're hoping comes out of that whole process.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you very much for the question.

What we do know is that the modern veteran, from really 1989 onward, looks different. We're representing a more diverse Canada as we move forward. As more and more women, in all their intersections of identity, have come to serve, we look at benefits and programs not just in the Canadian Armed Forces but within the veterans community that actually don't fit. What about exposure? I know that we've had some challenges from people in the Persian Gulf with reproductive challenges. The occupational health aspects for women are not the same. Unisex fits nobody, and it's the same with this.

The women's council is actually intended to advise the minister on how to move forward for both the RCMP and veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces. How do we better support women in all our intersections in terms of addressing benefits and whatever the issues may be? I think that's quite an important thing to do. There's both me and Senator Bev Busson, who is an RCMP veteran. Along with about five other people, we have gone through essentially a blind assessment process to try to create a roster of people who can well advise the minister in moving forward on women's issues.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Would you specifically be advising the veterans minister, or are there other...? I'm the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth, and I think there are a lot of parallels there too, so I hope you have that communication with other ministers as well.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Being a sitting senator and the chair of our veterans committee, I have to make sure I do not cross lines. I'm very thoughtful about conflict of interest. If I were to talk in the abstract on this, I would suggest that having that discussion with the Minister of Veterans Affairs would be of value.

I will go back to my time as a serving member in the Canadian Armed Forces and defence champion for women. I was in front of all committees, minus the veterans committee, so I think it's a good point you have.

Ms. Lisa Hefpner: Do you expect that the board can help us even further improve military culture so that it's even more welcoming to women and to gender-diverse people?

● (1245)

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Again, how the Minister of Veterans Affairs shares her counsel with the Minister of National Defence will be up to her, but you have women with, as I said, intersection of identity, with broad experience levels, who could probably help the RCMP too. It's certainly.... Sure.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, I will start by presenting a motion, which should be fairly quick. Mr. Casey and I were on the same wavelength when I showed it to him, and my colleagues from the other parties have also been informed. I will read it out nonetheless.

For my part, I found it difficult to hear from six witnesses today in two hours or perhaps a bit less. We had a lot of topics to cover, and we could have asked a lot more questions. That is partly why we are presenting the following motion.

That the committee hold two additional meetings as part of its study on the recognition of Persian Gulf Veterans, as well as on the review of the definition of war, wartime service, special duty service and their distinctions, as well as the determination process and eligibility criteria for veterans' benefits; that these meetings include the testimonies of Sean Bruyca and Louise Richard, for a duration of one hour; and that an additional, one-hour meeting with the Minister of National Defence be requested.

I am requesting one hour for each witness. Mr. Bruyca was here today, but as I said we still have a lot of questions for him. We are suggesting two witnesses, but the other parties may suggest others, of course, since we will have four hours.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

First of all, regarding the minister, a motion has already been agreed to requesting his appearance. The clerk and I will push ahead to get him to appear for one hour.

As to the other party, I'm not sure if our colleagues require a translation of the motion. Are you ready to discuss and agree to it?

Mr. Casey, are you aware of it?

[English]

Mr. Sean Casey: Yes.

[Translation]

Yes, we will be supporting the motion. I have nothing to add.

The Chair: Okay.

[English]

Blake Richards would like to say something.

Mr. Richards, go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards: Let me start with a question. I don't want to yield the floor, but I would like an answer to the question.

If there's a desire to have more meetings, that's one thing, but it's another when we start to get into giving this witness one hour and this witness an hour. We had some good witnesses today, and one of them wasn't listed in this motion as one we wanted to bring back.

Is there an opportunity for others to be brought back in that scenario? There might be other witnesses we'd like to bring back. Is there an ability to add new witnesses? When we submitted our witnesses, we submitted them on the basis of understanding the length of the study, and now, if the study is going to be extended, I would seek to be provided with the opportunity to add new witnesses, if that's the case. Can we get some kind of an indication of what the status of our witness list is and if we would be given an opportunity to add additional witnesses to the list as well?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Can the chair or the clerk maybe give us an indication?

I don't want to yield the floor because I do have other comments.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I know that the honourable senator is aware of the procedures, but I am just telling you that we have to discuss that portion, and we will come back to you.

● (1250)

[Translation]

Mr. Desilets, can you—

Mr. Luc Desilets: I thought we could do this very quickly, and I would like to do that. So I would ask you to amend my motion and remove the last part, where the witness names will be provided. We will leave it up to the clerk to decide on the four witnesses who will be invited. For our part, we will forward the witness names to the clerk.

Thank you.

The Chair: If I understand correctly, you are leaving it up to us to hold two additional meetings with four further witnesses as part of this study, despite the part about inviting the minister.

[English]

Mr. Richards, what are your thoughts?

Mr. Blake Richards: Could I still get a response to the question, Chair? Are we going to have additional meetings? What is the status of our witness list? How many witnesses have not been invited at this point, and is there an opportunity for us to suggest additional witnesses?

The Chair: Mr. Richards, as with your intervention in the previous panel, because our original clerk is not here today, I can't tell you exactly—and the analyst also—how many witnesses we have left. You can leave it to the committee to look at it and try to invite them to appear. We can also ask some of the previous witnesses—such as Mr. Bruyca, for example, who was here this morning—to send us a brief or something that we can add,

I understand that you all agree to have two more meetings.

Oh, am I mistaken?

Please go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, what I'm trying to determine is the need for the additional meetings.

If we have no additional witnesses.... I guess I'm trying to understand if we have witnesses who have not yet been invited. We don't have the answer to that. As well, no indication has been given as to whether we could offer additional witnesses to the clerk and the chair.

It's hard for me to support a motion without knowing whether there's a need. Certainly there is no doubt that there would be others we could hear from, but if we don't have witnesses on our list and we're not accepting additional witnesses, it seems a bit odd.

The Chair: For sure I can, as chair, accept other witnesses. I know that next week is going to be a break week, but I have to give instruction to the clerk also.

As well, we have witnesses in front of us so, members of the committee, we have to decide or—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Chair—

The Chair: Yes, Ms.—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry, but I still have the floor, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: This seems as though it might be a discussion that we need to have in committee business, and we can allow the witnesses.... We have very little time left, and it seems there is some confusion here as to what will occur and what won't.

I would suggest that we set this aside and table it for committee business, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney. You have the floor.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Could I just call for the vote? I think the committee can make a decision. Most people want to make a decision, and I think we should just vote on it.

The Chair: Before we go to a vote, Mr. Desilets would like to say something.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, I am requesting two additional meetings, which would be four hours in total. I removed the last part of my motion regarding the witnesses. In my opinion, we can call witnesses back, as any committee can do. That is my intention, but I would send their names to the clerk. On the other hand, there are two new witnesses we would like to invite to the committee, in-

cluding Alex Ruff, a Conservative MP whose thoughts on the matter I would really like to hear.

I am certainly in favour of voting on this. I am really sorry; I thought this could be dealt with in two minutes.

● (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Before talking about the witness list, we have to agree to the motion.

[*English*]

Mr. Richards, the floor is yours.

Mr. Blake Richards: Chair, I will make a quick amendment to the motion. Hopefully, it can be adopted quickly, as I want to get back to the witnesses as well.

If we're going to have additional meetings, I know that the Minister of National Defence has been invited, but I would amend the motion by adding that we invite the Minister of Veterans Affairs to appear as one of the witnesses for this study as well.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: That was Mr. Desilets's intention when he presented the motion.

As I see it, we can now proceed with the vote in light of Mr. Richards's remarks.

[*English*]

It seems that we can say that there was a unanimous decision to go with that motion. Are we agreed?

Mr. Blake Richards: Mr. Chair, I suggested an amendment to add the Minister of Veterans Affairs as a witness. Are we voting on that first?

The Chair: Okay. First, on the amendment, are there any objections to adopting the amendment presented by Mr. Richards?

There are not.

Now, on the motion as amended, are there any objections to adopting the motion as amended?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I object, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Okay.

For the motion as amended, I'm going to ask the clerk to take the vote to make sure that we are on the same page.

We're going to take the vote on the motion as amended.

Mr. Sean Casey: Are we not going to vote on the amendment?

The Chair: There was no objection to it.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead on a point of order, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: You clearly indicated that you were asking whether there was any objection, which means you were seeking unanimous consent. You indicated that you had received that unanimous consent. I believe that we have in fact passed the amendment.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No, I objected immediately.

The Chair: I understand that too, Mr. Richards, but I have a lot of colleagues saying that it was not their understanding, so I think I have to find a way to permit all of you guys to intervene. I think that we can go to a vote on the amendment and after that go to the motion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's what I was saying to the clerk. I was careful to add to the last sentence a request for a one-hour meeting with the minister. That is already in the motion, so we don't need an amendment on that. Moreover, a motion to that effect was already presented two weeks ago.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Desilets, I think you added the National Defence minister, but not the Veterans Affairs minister. I think that's what Mr. Richards is trying to do.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Richards's proposed amendment is on the table to invite the Minister of Veterans Affairs to appear for this study. I would ask the clerk to now proceed with the vote.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you to the clerk. Mr. Richards' amendment has therefore been agreed to.

Let us now move on to Mr. Desilets's duly amended motion.

We will now vote once again on this amended motion.

I would ask the clerk to be clear.

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: The motion as amended has therefore been agreed to.

Let us continue.

[*English*]

Given the time, I'd like to ask members of the committee and also the witnesses—maybe they have other engagements—if we can do eight or 10 minutes to conclude this panel. Are there any objections?

There are no objections. Witnesses, is it okay for you too?

I'm going to give five minutes to Mr. Desilets and five minutes to Ms. Blaney, and we're going to conclude the panel.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Once again, I'm sorry that it took so long.

Senator Patterson, in your opinion, is it absolutely necessary to declare war on another country for it to be considered wartime service?

[*English*]

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you very much. I think that's a very pertinent question.

In preparation to come here, I did a little bit of research. I'm going to go back to one of the previous questions. We have the legislative view of it, which is the declaration of war under the law of international armed conflict. It certainly talks about a beginning and an end, but it's a legal entity. When you start breaking it down into, effectively, the administrative processes that fall under the National Defence Act or the veterans charter, etc., this is where it becomes a noun.

Bear with me here. I thought, what is war? There is nothing that we have heard from any of your witnesses that tells you that you do not bleed red, no matter what legislation calls it. I know that sounds pretty harsh, but in the impact on families and members from injury and death, it doesn't matter what we legally call it, so I thought I'd give you a couple of interesting points.

In the Oxford dictionary, “war”, as a noun, is a conflict carried out by force of arms between nations or between parties against each other, so basically that includes the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Kosovo. Do you see where I'm going here?

What I also thought was interesting is that we know that from 1945 on, when Canada then looked at the UN charter and it became “police action” and other names, we understand that it was to walk away from global conflict as we had known it, but did you know that under the UN charter, they define war not as a declaration but as an action?

Interestingly, they define war as any conflict that meets the criteria of armed conflict according to the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols.

As a health services person in the Persian conflict, I wore a red cross, and those Royal Canadian Regiment soldiers provided force protection for us because I was only to raise by arm in defence, as opposed to any other reason.

They talk about additional protocols: “An armed conflict exists when there is a resort to armed force between States (international armed conflict) or protracted violence between government authorities and organized armed groups within a State (non-international armed conflict)”.

Why does this matter? It matters because it talks about the actions that take place. If we were to take the legislation and apply it to those of us who have served, you can be a war veteran if, administratively, we write the definition of “war” in there, but when they look at “special duty area”.... Again, I’m not an expert in this. We need very clever people who write regulations and the policies that fall out of it, along with the Veterans Well-being Act, but when you look at a special duty area—and there are all sorts of other things that come with it—why can you not have...? If I use all of the examples provided by my colleagues here and the many places that we’ve been, they get a war designation.

From a benefit perspective, we can do it one way, but from the commemoration perspective of a war veteran, we are asking to be recognized for the ultimate sacrifice to our country.

Why are we in dispute? It’s because it’s very hard to define the family that we create and the environments that we go into in a bureaucratic process. It’s about recognition. It’s about dignity. It’s about justice.

There is potential, and I think it’s worth looking into bringing the noun “war” into the regulation at the policy level, making an assessment and seeing if that works. Take it out of legislation and put it into a lower level.

[Translation]

Thank you.

● (1305)

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Senator Patterson.

You have really done your homework. I really appreciate the idea of the impact of armed conflicts.

Our understanding is that the legislation will have to be amended to achieve a measure of equity.

How would the Senate react if it received legislative amendments?

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: That’s a good question.

[English]

I will bracket where I would have to recuse myself from voting, because of course I would benefit from any of this, so I want to put that on the table right away.

Here in the House of Commons, when it comes to the people who are veterans and serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces and the RCMP, you care. We know that. I think it would be received well.

The question is whether it is a government bill or a private member’s bill. From where is it going to come at us? Again, as we’ve just been through, these are the processes of Parliament that matter as well.

On a reception perspective, I think there would be good reception. Again, this is about recognition, commemoration, dignity and respect, and then the insurance principles you talked about can be dealt with later.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Senator Patterson.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[English]

Now let’s go to Ms. Rachel Blaney for five minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here and, of course, for your service to our country. I’m sorry you don’t get a bit more time to share your stories, but welcome to Parliament. Here we are.

I’m going to come to the senator first.

I really appreciated your recommendation around having the committee study the equivalency between the two acts. The part I found particularly intriguing is that veterans should be invited to a round table to inform this study. One of the challenges we hear from veterans again and again is that they often don’t know what they can apply for and that they don’t understand the changes.

I’m wondering if you think it would be appropriate for VAC to do some of that work—to sit down with veterans and go through the process of understanding the different benefits, while getting feedback from the people from the wars you’re talking about. They are left out and not acknowledged in the way they need to be.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you for the question.

I want you to know that there have been at least 35 SDAs since World War II. There were two wars, and Korea. They were designated as wars. There are many living veterans. As we always say, “Nothing about us without us.” We sit at this lofty level in Canada, making policy, but we don’t always know the lived experience.

I’ll go back to the concept of having the women veterans council advise the minister. I think that is a very good idea—a veterans advisory council or special group on benefits and harmonizations. It would be of great value because, as we heard, there are mixed experiences with Veterans Affairs. There are some good Veterans Affairs experiences. I believe they’re willing to listen, so I like your recommendation.

● (1310)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I understand you have quite a bit of experience addressing Gulf War illness. I’m wondering if you could talk a little about what the work you’ve done looks like, and what happened.

What we’ve heard from testimony as well is that Gulf War illness is not acknowledged. There’s a desire for that to be understood by Canadians a lot more, so I think your work would really help the committee understand next steps and the recommendations we should make in that context.

Hon. Rebecca Patterson: Thank you for the question.

As I said, I was a nursing officer. When I came back, I ended up as the head nurse on the floor that ran the Gulf War clinic for the Canadian Armed Forces. Retired Colonel Ken Scott was the internal medicine specialist who did the assessments. This was driven by the fact that other allied nations were saying, “We’re getting a funny constellation of symptoms coming together, and we want to know what they’re linked to.” On my floor, people would come in from all across the country. That’s when we still had military hospitals. They would go through a full battery of tests to make sure it was not some underlying condition. As you know, it’s a disputed syndrome. What is it? How does it work?

One of the challenges is that we don’t invest in research. I’m going back to that again. If you want a Canadian solution, it’s easy to say, “No, we need the data. Do the research.” Moving forward, other countries have done a wealth of investigation. They’ve looked at things. Is it a form of post-traumatic stress syndrome? No. However, there are still these outlying things. They’ve done more work. If we in Canada want to get on this, we need to put some investment into proper research, because it will become hidden.

The challenges in a country like Canada that continue to drive us forward... We say, “Fire and forget. It’s over. Move on to the next issue and the next war.” If you want to look back at it retrospectively, invest in research that is gender-based—disaggregated—in order to see what the delta is, because this is an occupational health issue.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

In that context, I’m going to stop asking questions and move that the testimony of retired navy Lieutenant Louise Richard from March 19, 2013, at ACVA be adopted into the study on wartime service veterans

To give context, she specifically talked about Gulf War illness. I want to make sure we have that testimony on record if we need to access it during the report.

Hopefully, we can just move to a vote.

The Chair: Ms. Blaney, we don’t really have too much time, but I can ask members quickly what their thoughts on that are.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: We’re fine with it on this side.

The Chair: Is it just to add that to the report?

Ms. Rachel Blaney: It’s just so we have access to that testimony.

Of course, my team sent it out to everyone and we were given ample opportunity to review it. The context is specifically with the Gulf War illness. She spoke about it in that testimony, so if we can’t get her in front of the committee, it would be good to have access to it.

Mr. Scot Davidson (York—Simcoe, CPC): Are we being forced to vote?

The Chair: Yes. Do you agree on that?

• (1315)

[Translation]

Do you have something to say, Mr. Desilets?

Mr. Luc Desilets: I’m not sure I understand correctly. I understand what was said, but I don’t see why we need to vote.

[English]

The Chair: I have to say to you and Ms. Blaney that you are allowed to present motions like that, but colleagues don’t even have a copy in—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: They have a copy. Yes, they do. I emailed it out about three weeks ago. I sent it to every single member. I’ve had conversations with every party. I know there was some concern of context from the Conservatives, which is why I’ve given the context that she testified specifically about Gulf War syndrome.

We know we have a limited amount of time. It’s just testimony from 2013. It’s just allowing us to be able to access it.

Hopefully we can just call the vote to move forward. This is something that everybody had access to.

The Chair: Yes, I understand that, Ms. Blaney, but I’m in a situation where, first of all, we have the interpreters until 1:20. That’s 20 minutes more, because we went longer and I asked for unanimous consent to—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Can I just call the vote?

The Chair: No. It’s going to take some time, and we have witnesses.

I will suggest to you, if you can present it at the next—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You said I had five minutes, Chair.

[Translation]

The Chair: Yes.

[English]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I took my five minutes and then I moved the motion. I think if we just vote, we’ll get in before 1:20.

The Chair: As I said, I think there are some discussions that members of the committee need to have.

[Translation]

Between colleagues, I think it’s feasible.

[English]

We have two more meetings to go. I would prefer, because I have a technical team and I have—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: A vote takes less than five minutes.

The Chair: Colleagues, I’m so sorry. It’s time to close the meeting because the technical staff and the interpreters—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That’s really disappointing, Chair.

The Chair: I’m so sorry, but—

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I gave three weeks. If people can’t answer, that’s ridiculous. It’s one veteran’s testimony.

The Chair: I'm so sorry.

To our witnesses, thank you for coming to testify. Even though you are here as individuals, all of your comments really matter to all veterans.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the Honourable Rebecca Patterson, rear admiral (retired) and senator for Ontario.

I also want to thank the two witnesses who appeared as individuals: Colonel (retired) Marc Gasparotto, Afghanistan veteran, com-

bat sub-unit commander, and Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Dean Tremblay, Afghanistan veteran, sub-unit commander.

Dear colleagues, if you could please send us your witness list by next Tuesday at noon.

[English]

The meeting is adjourned.

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