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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1640)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** We are resuming the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 29, 2024, the committee is beginning its study on the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Please keep in mind that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[English]

For this hour, the witnesses are Mr. Todd Ross, who is joining us by video conference from New Brunswick as an individual; and Ms. Danielle Teillet, a historian who is with us today from the Canadian War Museum.

I'd like to thank you for accepting our invitation to appear before our committee.

[Translation]

I'm going to ask Mr. Ross to give his opening remarks first.

Mr. Ross, you have five minutes. We will then hear from Ms. Teillet, followed by questions and answers.

[English]

Mr. Ross, the floor is yours for five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Todd Ross (As an Individual):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon.

[Witness spoke in Michif and provided the following text:]

Taanshi kiyawaaw. Wabinaquot d-ishinihkaason—Aeñ Michif niya.

[English]

My name is Todd Ross. I introduced myself with my spirit name in Michif. I'm joining you today from the unceded and surrendered lands of the Wolastoqiyik in Menahquesk, now known as Saint John. I'm a Red River Métis, I'm a veteran, I'm two-spirited and I'm a citizen of the Métis Nation of Ontario.

I want to thank the committee and the members for creating this opportunity to speak on the experiences of indigenous veterans. I bring a unique experience as a two-spirit, Métis veteran who was part of the LGBT purge.

I want to chat with you today about my observations on funding for indigenous-specific services.

I served from December 1987 to June 1990. From the beginning of 1989 to mid-1990, I was under investigation for security concerns. I was part of what is now known as the LGBT purge, and I was offered an honourable discharge that stated I was "not advantageously employable due to homosexuality". When I was released in 1990, I was told I was not a veteran and I would never receive veteran services, so I did not engage in any veteran services for the next 25 years.

It was my connection to the Métis that brought me back to the veteran family. When I lived in Toronto, I became engaged with the Métis Nation of Ontario and served as the chair of the Toronto and York Region Métis Council. Early in my involvement, I received a call from the late Joe Paquette. Joe was a Métis elder who served as the president of the Métis Nation of Ontario veterans' council. He called me up one day and we had a long talk. He asked why I wasn't involved with the Métis veterans.

I explained my experience with the LGBT purge and my fear of engaging with veterans as a queer person. I was told upon release that I was not a veteran. I didn't feel like a veteran and I would not feel welcome within any veteran community as a queer person. He responded—he lectured me, actually—that a veteran is a veteran is a veteran. With open arms, I was welcomed into the Métis veterans' council as a member, and he invited me to march with the Métis veterans at the Louis Riel Day ceremony at Queen's Park.

For the first time in 25 years, I put on my beret and marched in a parade. This was uncomfortable for me in the beginning, and I still feel trepidation when connecting with other veterans, but the Métis veterans' council has been incredibly supportive. Since that time, I've had a few opportunities to connect with other indigenous veterans and see the value of those opportunities to connect for engagement, ceremony and healing.

In 2017, I was able to attend the 100th anniversary of Vimy in Ottawa alongside other Métis veterans. This gathering provided an opportunity to meet, to share experiences and to learn about the involvement of the Métis people in the First World War. Part of the trip even included a visit to the Canadian War Museum, where we were able to see the indigenous contributions on display.

In 2013, I was invited to travel to the National Indigenous Peoples Day events in Winnipeg, alongside Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation veteran Wendy Jocko, to represent veterans at the APTN live event. We interacted with numerous indigenous veterans over the two days, and were even able to bring some of the veterans to the Veteran Affairs services table to ensure that they got connected.

Earlier this year, I attended the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings on Juno Beach. I was there on behalf of the Rainbow Veterans of Canada, but was pleased to be alongside representatives from other indigenous veteran groups. These connections were again invaluable, and the inclusion not only highlighted the contributions of indigenous people in these conflicts, but provided space for ceremony, for healing and for recognition.

In August this year, VAC supported a 2SLGBTQI+ veterans forum in Fredericton, New Brunswick. At the event, we were able to invite Wolastoqey Grand Chief Ron Tremblay to lead a talking circle with two-spirit veterans and other LGBTQI+ veterans. It was an incredible experience for all who participated, and I believe it was the first time I've been able to be in a ceremonial space with other queer indigenous veterans.

Each of these examples highlights opportunities to connect with first nations, Inuit and Métis veterans, opportunities for engagement, opportunities for ceremony and opportunities for healing. Connections to community are extremely important in creating opportunities for holistic healing.

Although I'm not directly involved with the governance of the Métis veterans, I know a barrier to more inclusion is the lack of available funding to support indigenous veteran groups. There are funds that could be used to reduce barriers by bringing Métis veterans together in community and reducing barriers to connect with other indigenous veterans organizations.

I want to point out that the relationship with the VAC leadership team has been stellar. Through my volunteer work as a veteran, I've always felt a strong partnership.

I'm incredibly thankful to VAC for the opportunities it has provided for 2SLGBTQI+ veterans and women veterans to gather and share experiences. I'm not aware of similar opportunities for indigenous veterans or specifically for first nations, Inuit, or Métis veterans to gather as distinctive communities, but this is something I would recommend.

I will leave it there, Mr. Chair, so that I can speak during questions to some of my own personal experiences in accessing veteran services. Recognizing the amount of time, I'll pass the floor back.

• (1645)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Ross. It's interesting to hear about your career, your courage and your story.

We'll now go to Ms. Danielle Teillet. She's a historian.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet (Historian, Canadian War Museum):** *Taanshi kiyawaaw.* Hello.

My name is Danielle Teillet. I am Red River Métis and settler, originally from Treaty 1 territory. I now live here on unceded and unsurrendered Algonquin Anishinabe territory. I'm also the inaugural historian of indigenous military history at the Canadian War Museum.

Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak and contribute to this important study.

As a historian, I can offer an overview of the experiences of indigenous veterans of the two world wars—that's my area of expertise—though I'm not well positioned to speak to contemporary issues, as Todd Ross just did.

Understanding the historical context of indigenous military service can provide us with crucial insights into present-day issues. As you can imagine, five minutes can only scratch the surface of this complex history, which is already quite well documented in the committee's 2019 report on indigenous veterans and other reports.

To understand the challenges indigenous service people faced, it's critical to consider the broader context of how indigenous people were treated in general through systemic discrimination and colonial policies and legislation. The government and society's treatment of indigenous veterans was inextricably linked to the treatment of indigenous people in general.

The number of indigenous people to serve in 20th century conflicts is elusive. Approximately 4,000 status Indians served for Canada in the First World War, and an estimated 4,200 served in the Second World War. Thousands more non-status first nations, Inuit and Métis people enlisted without official recognition of their indigeneity.

There were certain barriers that shaped the enlistment and service of indigenous people during this era. For example, during the First World War, initially first nations people were dissuaded by the government from enlisting. This was based partly on unfavourable and racist depictions in popular literature at the time, which led to a paternalistic logic that "Germans might refuse to extend...the [supposed] privileges of civilized warfare" to first nations soldiers.

In the Second World War, recruitment for the navy and air force initially required enlistees to be "of pure European descent and of the White Race." Restrictive policies like these were not applied universally, and as casualties mounted during both wars, these types of barriers were abandoned in an effort to boost recruitment.

For many indigenous individuals who served during this era, their wartime service was the first time they had experienced a sense of equality with their white settler peers, but they would return to Canada after their service to the same discrimination they had known before they enlisted. Indigenous veterans did not generally receive equal treatment after returning to civilian life. Status Indian veterans, specifically, returned home to life as wards of the state.

Restrictions such as the prohibition on the sale of alcohol to status Indians meant that many first nations veterans were not able to participate in Legion activities, since liquor was served at many functions. Moreover, the right to vote federally did not come to status Indian men until 1960. They did not have the full rights and benefits of citizenship under Canada's Indian Act but had enlisted to go to war for Canada anyway.

There was a shared feeling by many indigenous veterans that there was a disconnect between the significance of their wartime service and sacrifices and the political, economic and social realities they returned home to. This was, in large part, because they were excluded in many cases from accessing veteran supports. Pensions and benefits such as land and financial grants that were set up to support veterans after both wars were notionally available to all veterans; however, most indigenous claims were denied.

Some veterans even returned home from the First World War to find that the reserve lands of their communities had shrunk or disappeared entirely. The federal government acquired more than 85,000 acres of reserve land in western Canada for the settlement of non-indigenous veterans after the war.

These injustices had lasting impacts on many indigenous veterans, some of whom went on to organize politically and lobby for indigenous and veterans' rights after their service. These experiences are well documented in the literature and in interviews with indigenous veterans, including through the Canadian War Museum's "In Their Own Voices" project, which includes dozens of interviews with indigenous-identified veterans.

• (1650)

Hopefully, this very brief historical overview has provided some context as you explore more contemporary issues in this study. The challenges that indigenous veterans faced in the post-world war era's discriminatory social, legislative and policy structures persisted for a long time, as did the lack of recognition they experienced.

Thank you for your time.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Teillet.

I know that five minutes is a really short time, but it's important for us to listen to you. You may know that we had a study on women veterans, and we issued 42 recommendations. We said that we should have a study on indigenous and Black veterans to see what's going on.

Now we're going to start the first round of questions. It's going to be for six minutes each. I invite Mr. Blake Richards, who is the vice-chair of the committee.

Go ahead, Mr. Richards.

**Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC):** Thank you to both of you for your testimony.

I'm going to start with you, Ms. Teillet.

Some of the historical things that you shared with us are shocking to hear. When we hear about that kind of discrimination, it's hard for us to even fathom, in today's day and age, some of the types of discrimination you were talking about, especially when you're talking about people who went to serve their country despite the fact that maybe their country didn't really acknowledge them and their backgrounds.

What I'd like to do, though, is jump a little closer to the present. This committee previously studied the experience of indigenous veterans. Unfortunately, as has often been the case with this government, they accepted a number of the recommendations that this committee made and then never followed through with them. This practice of not keeping promises is, I think, really at the core of the conversation around reconciliation.

I want your thoughts on how damaging it is, how demoralizing it is to first nations, Inuit and Métis people to see a government acknowledge their issues, promise to fix them and then never bother to follow through.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** That's a great point. Obviously, I'm not a veteran myself. I can't speak for others, although I have studied numerous interviews and oral histories with indigenous veterans.

I think there's real frustration. Some of it is about financial supports, but it's not just about that. It's about recognition of the contributions that they've made. I think reconciliation is a process. It's not a one-and-done, and it's not something that can be an event and then we're finished with it. I think that's where some of the frustration is coming from.

There are veterans, and there are, in some cases, residential school survivors who are also veterans. They're implementing the truth part of "truth and reconciliation", and I think that it's on us as institutions to implement the reconciliation part and to follow through. I think it's a lot easier to say the right things than it is to follow through and do the right things.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Certainly it is, and it's important that when someone makes a promise, they follow through with it. Thank you for highlighting that.

Mr. Ross, I will turn to you.

First of all, thank you for your service. Thank you for your perseverance. I appreciate that you had others help to push you to get involved in the veteran community, and the veteran community is better for you being a part of it. Thank you for taking the advice that a veteran is a veteran is a veteran, because it's very true.

I believe that you've either served on the board of or been involved with a couple of different organizations that deal with housing issues for vulnerable populations. Is that correct?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, I have served in the past.

• (1655)

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I hear a lot these days about homeless veterans. There are more and more organizations cropping up to fill the needs for housing for veterans who are finding themselves underhoused or homeless.

One thing that I hear sometimes, fairly regularly in fact, is that there are veterans out there who have, in some cases, thousands of dollars' worth of benefits that might be available to them from Veterans Affairs, but they're unable to access them because they're either not aware of them or they don't have an address or a way to access My VAC Account. They don't have any way to access those kinds of things.

I wonder if you could just talk, from your experience, about dealing with housing issues. For someone, particularly a veteran who's suffering from mental health issues or physical ailments, can cumbersome bureaucratic processes and paperwork stand as a barrier to their being able to access the help they need?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Thank you for the question.

My experience in housing has been through a few boards. I'm on current boards where we support some veterans who are in need of supports. I think one of the important things for housing is the wraparound services that keep people housed. Often, I've found with some of the veterans we work with that they get into a place where they are getting housed, but then other pieces of their life are falling. As a result, they're at risk of losing housing.

With some of the barriers, of course, and the social determinants of health, with a lack of access to communications or the lack of a strong relationships with the Veterans Affairs offices, people often fall through the cracks. A lot of organizations kind of step in to support people when they have connections, but I'm sure more—

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I'm sorry. I have very limited time left, and you touched on what I think is an important point. I want to follow up on it a little bit.

When it comes to those kinds of services, do you think Veterans Affairs could be more proactive in helping veterans before they fall into homelessness?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Again, I think there are so many challenges when you're looking at homelessness. Particularly with veterans, my experience is that homelessness tends to be one issue that people are dealing with. My experience has been that there are lots of supports from VAC, but they don't always reach the people in a timely manner because of these other complications that could be involved.

When we've alerted VAC to an issue, they've been very responsive. It's identifying those individuals who are falling through the cracks. If they're connected with an organization, the organization can often support them, but a lot of times they're not connected.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** I guess that's what I was getting at: Could they be more proactive in helping to identify who those people are?

**The Chair:** Thank you. Your time is up.

**Mr. Blake Richards:** Can he be given a brief opportunity to respond to that?

**The Chair:** Mr. Ross, you can have 15 seconds, if you would like to react to that.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** I'll just say quickly that with a lot of services, there needs to be adaptability. Sometimes a bureaucracy can't be as adaptable, so I would encourage all departments to be more adaptable.

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

Let's go to Randeep Sarai for six minutes.

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

Thank you to both witnesses.

Ms. Teillet, I understand you had the opportunity to support a documentary, available on CBC Gem, called *Indian Braves*. This project went across the country to meet veterans and their families and to hear their stories of life in the Canadian military.

Could you share more about this project with our committee and why projects like these are very important for Canadians?

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Yes. Thank you for the question.

That documentary, as you said, was called *Indian Braves*. I believe it aired nationwide on CBC on Remembrance Day last year, which was very exciting for us at the War Museum. I think these projects are so critical to build awareness in broader mainstream society.

For me, I research this stuff. I live this stuff. I work in it every day. It's sort of like how you, I'm sure, on the veterans affairs committee, live veterans affairs. This is a big part of your agenda. But I think for the average person, it's not something that there's a great awareness of.

I just gave a talk on Friday, actually, to a group in Ottawa. We talked about why we have Indigenous Veterans Day, for example, which is coming up on November 8, next Friday. There's a lack of awareness. A lot of people, I think, question why we have a separate day for indigenous veterans. It's an interesting question, but I think it comes down to having knowledge about the historical foundations. Some of the stuff I spoke about and elaborated on a little bit more in the documentary was about the complete lack of recognition of the contributions of indigenous service people, fundamentally the sacrifices they made, the lack of supports, the lack of recognition for status Indians, and the lack of full citizenship rights until after the Second World War, until 1960.

I think with more awareness.... As they say, if we know better, we can do better. I also think that the more the general public understands about these historical foundations, the more momentum we can build to hopefully improve the lives of current veterans, contemporary veterans.

• (1700)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

I just went to a Sikh Remembrance Day ceremony in Kitchener this weekend. It reminds me of what you said. There were a lot of people who weren't allowed to join the military. They joined, but there was a pass, I guess, because they needed people. They felt that, this way, they'll be integrated and respected more. As you said, when they came back, sometimes it wasn't.... In this case, I think there were 10 in total from the Sikh Indian community joining on behalf of Canada at the time.

Can you provide an overview of the historical participation of indigenous people in the military, including key conflicts and contributions, so we have a context? What were the battles and wars, and what numbers participated?

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Absolutely.

As I alluded to in my presentation, the numbers are elusive. There were indigenous people serving alongside colonial forces in the Seven Years' War and the War of 1812. Indigenous people went to the Nile Expedition. There was a precedent long before the First World War. That was a motivation for a lot of indigenous people to enlist. They saw it as part of their relationship with the Crown through elements such as treaties and previous military alliances. Even the Royal Proclamation of 1763 recognizes first nations' sovereign status.

I think Veterans Affairs, at this point, estimates that about 12,000 indigenous people have served in 20th century conflicts. Again, due to lack of recognition of Métis people's indigeneity, for example, I don't know that we'll ever have real numbers to suggest how many people served in conflicts. In fact, I read the account of a Second World War veteran who talked about his Métis nationhood not being recognized when he enlisted. They said, "Well, what part European are you? What type of European are you?" He said, "French", so they wrote "French" on his paper. They said there was no such thing as Métis. That was a real frustration for him, and he talked about that when he was a veteran.

These are historical issues I'm speaking about, but they're real issues, yes.

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** I'll go to you, Mr. Ross.

How can indigenous communities be more involved in shaping the policies and programs that affect veterans and how indigenous veterans are commemorated and remembered?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** I mentioned there are currently a women's forum and a 2SLGBTQI+ forum that Veterans Affairs organizes each year. It would be my recommendation to begin having an indigenous forum, or specific first nations, Métis and Inuit forums, bringing together veterans from those communities so we can share our experiences and continue to build our connections, contemporarily, across the nation. The existing forums are a great opportunity to find out where the frustrations are, and where the solutions are, so I'd highly recommend that that happen.

• (1705)

**Mr. Randeep Sarai:** Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Now it's over to the second vice-chair of the committee.

Go ahead, Mr. Desilets. You have six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for accepting our invitation to appear before the committee.

Ms. Teillet, you said that indigenous veterans didn't have the same rights as other veterans.

Could you explain what exactly you meant by that?

[*English*]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** When I said that indigenous veterans didn't have the same rights, it's more broadly about indigenous people not having the same rights. Status Indians returning from the First World War and the Second World War were wards of the state, so they did not have the right to vote.

For example, when conscription for the First World War and the Second World War came up, there was a lot of resistance among indigenous communities, and first nations communities in particular. They said, “We are the wards. How can we be compelled to go and fight if we are the supposed child and you are the supposed parent, in essence? How can you compel us?” During the First World War, there was an exemption made due to resistance by first nations communities. They suggested that treaty Indians could not be compelled by conscription. That was not successful during the Second World War, with the National Resources Mobilization Act.

Does that answer your question?

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** In a way, that answers it.

We know that indigenous people made a significant contribution to the war effort, but there was a dark side. We also know that thousands of acres of land were taken from indigenous people during the wars.

Am I wrong?

[English]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Yes, at least 85,000 acres of reserve land were purchased by the federal government during the First World War for the settlement of non-indigenous veterans when they would return home. Unfortunately, the funds used to purchase that land didn't even go to the communities specifically, to the bands; they were held in trust by the government to spend as it saw fit.

This is a theme that exists throughout history, especially with status Indians, with this stereotype, this paternalistic approach that suggests that indigenous people don't know how to spend money and don't know how to be responsible with funds, and so, we, as the government, will hold on to that money for them. That is seen as one of many reasons why some indigenous people did not receive access to pensions and benefits, because it was seen as, well, they don't need that much money. It was a very paternalistic approach towards indigenous people.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** What do you make of that?

Why did the government purchase that land at the time?

I have trouble wrapping my head around that. Call me naive, but it's basically theft.

[English]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Yes, it is, absolutely. I think it is hard to understand.

However, this is where I come back to what I initially said. If we're looking at the history of indigenous veterans, it is inextricably linked to the treatment by the government of indigenous people overall. This is just one element of that treatment. When I mentioned in my talk that initially in the First World War, indigenous people were dissuaded from enlisting, eventually that policy was reversed, in part because military service was seen as a tool of assimilation. This was seen as a way to get indigenous people to integrate into mainstream society, to enfranchise, to give up their treaty rights and their status. This is all part of the history of the govern-

ment and the Crown's approach to indigenous people. This is just a small part of colonialism: colonialism in the British Crown, and then Canada's approach towards indigenous people. However, it's hard to wrap your mind around, for sure.

• (1710)

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** During the Second World War, did people enlist voluntarily?

[English]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Yes, absolutely.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** You mentioned the committee's 2019 report, so I assume you read the recommendations in the report.

Can you tell me whether the report made any difference?

Did anything come of the recommendations?

[English]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** I did not get a chance to read the recommendations. I read through the historical section, so I don't actually know what the recommendations were, but I can say that the historical foundation from the report is solid.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** If you could give the committee one recommendation to address what indigenous veterans experienced and continue to experience, what would it be?

[English]

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** I would say the most important thing would be to talk to the veterans themselves, or the groups that are representing them. Almost all indigenous governments and communities have veterans' organizations. There's a First Nations Veterans Council with the Assembly of First Nations. I believe almost all, if not all, of the Métis governments have veterans' organizations. They deal directly with these veterans and would have a really good idea, I think, of the needs and the challenges.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Now I'd like to invite Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

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

I thank both of our witnesses. Mr. Ross, I want to thank you for your service.

I'll go to you first, Ms. Teillet. I really appreciate your testimony today, and I think it's really important.



I think of the first nations people who lost status because of their service. I come to it from a very personal experience. My granny was in residential school in Lejac, and they married her off at 16 without any consent from her. Of course, you immediately lose your status. For my granny, what that meant was that when her father was dying, she couldn't go home without permission from the Indian agent.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what the impact was when these veterans came home and they couldn't participate in their community in the same way if they gave up their status.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** In my understanding of the research that I've done, in large part—and I said this in my presentation—generally speaking, access to supports was not equal. But there were indigenous veterans who did receive supports, and, by and large, they were people who were participating willingly or unwillingly in the assimilation agenda. They were people who were willing to, potentially—as I believe it says in the initial veterans report that you have for this committee—move to a specific community, willing to enfranchise and lose their status. That can be a disconnect from culture, from community.

On the other hand, if veterans did not choose to give that up, to leave their communities, then they didn't receive supports and they were cut off. They had to rely on their Indian agent for information of how to access benefits and pensions, and that was often not forthcoming. I think that's a real issue, for sure.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** You were very clear about the area of your study, and I appreciate that, but you talked a lot about systemic discrimination and racism. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on how the systemic discrimination and racism continue forward and what impacts they may have had on the current realities that veterans face.

• (1715)

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** As a historian, I tend to think in the past. I don't think I have an answer that could do your question justice. I'm sorry.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** That's fair enough. Thank you.

I'm going to go to Mr. Ross.

I really appreciated your sharing your story with us. The first thing is that I want to make sure we're clear about what the LGBT purge was. Could you do that? I know it's hard to sum it up really briefly, but I think it's really important that there be clarity for the report on what that is.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Sure, I'll do the elevator pitch.

The LGBT purge, from the mid-1950s up until 1996, was the systemic discrimination against queer people within the federal civil service, the military and the RCMP. It included investigations, interrogations and sometimes just harassment. Thousands of people were fired from their jobs. Most people, like myself, received an honourable discharge that said, "not advantageously employable due to homosexuality". It was tied into the McCarthy era. Canada continued it until it was ended by a court case in 1992 by Michelle Douglas.

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

In your particular story, which you shared with us earlier, it sounded like quite a horrific and terrifying experience. I'm wondering, as a Métis person dealing with this in the military, how was that for you? I would expect that, from a queer perspective and from a Métis experience perspective, it would have a really particular impact. I'm wondering if you could share that with the committee.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, certainly, at the time, it was more the impact for me as a queer person. That was the focus of the investigation, and that was the challenge. As I moved along in my life, though, the further challenge, as I looked for support, was that I'm a veteran, I'm gay and I'm Métis. Try to find a service provider who has the proficiency to work with a queer Métis veteran. I can pick one lane. I can usually find somebody who's Métis, or I can find somebody who works with veterans, or I can find somebody who works with queer people. It's rare that you can find two of those together, and almost impossible to find all three of those together. So you always have to put two of your identities aside to get support for any one of your identities. That's a real challenge right now.

Providing cultural safety for service providers, though, is one way around that, so it doesn't always fall on the individual to have to explain to somebody what a Métis person is and what the health disparities for Métis people are, or what the complications are for somebody who's gay. What are the services provided for somebody who's a veteran if I go to a queer service provider? Those are the real challenges that are faced within those three distinct communities.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** What we've heard very clearly from you is that really having an opportunity to come together with other indigenous veterans and having a clear perspective from the collective would be very helpful for services for VAC.

Can you talk about what you've heard from the work that you've been doing within the indigenous veterans community and what you feel would be appropriate for VAC to start hearing about?

**The Chair:** Mr. Ross, you have only 30 seconds to answer that question.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** There's been tremendous support from the indigenous veterans community, but we're just getting to meet each other. We're just getting to find each other, through some of these opportunities that I've had in the past. Having more opportunities across organizations, I think, is incredibly important, opportunities to have dialogue and to find out what the common problems are and where we can support each other.

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

We're going to our second round, with interventions of five minutes for the first two, and then two and a half minutes at the end.

Mrs. Wagantall, the floor is yours for five minutes. Please go ahead.

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

I appreciate having both of you here. Todd, thank you for your service as well.

I want to begin with a question for you, Ms. Teillet.

We did the study in 2019 and had the opportunity to travel. It was excellent. It was right across the country and up north to where the rangers were. One of our recommendations was this:

That Veterans Affairs Canada provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs with an explanation of the reasons that a settlement agreement was not reached to compensate Métis veterans of World War II and their families.

The rationale was that in budget 2019, which was the year that we did this, the Government of Canada proposed “\$30 million to recognize the contribution of Métis veterans to the country's Second World War efforts and to commemorate the sacrifices and achievements of all Métis veterans.”

I'm wondering if you can answer this for me. I've asked in the past how the \$30 million that was proposed to recognize that contribution was spent. Actually, the funding went to only one organization, and the Métis people who were not affiliated with that group, of course, were incredibly disappointed with that. Do you, with your background and history, know what organization it was that actually received that money?

• (1720)

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** No, unfortunately I don't know.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** I guess I'll have to do the research on that myself. Thank you.

That just shows a certain disconnect there, obviously, because you're talking about individuals of a group, our Métis folks, who went over, did serve incredibly for Canada and then failed to get the recognition they deserve still. In other words, that recommendation hasn't been completed. Is that correct?

**The Chair:** Maybe Mr. Ross could answer that question.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** Thank you, Chair. I was going to go to him next, ever so briefly, because I do have another question that I'm really quite excited to ask.

Mr. Ross, can you give me any feedback on that?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes. I do know, through my involvement with the Métis National Council through the Métis Nation of Ontario, that there was a Métis veterans organization created under the Métis National Council. They were distributing funds to World War II Métis veterans. I believe that fund still exists. I think that if you go to metisveterans.ca, that's the remnants of the group that received the funds. With the—

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** That's very helpful. Thank you. I'm sorry to interrupt you. I will follow up on that, because we want to make sure that all who served are recognized and have that support extended to their families.

I have another question. I had the opportunity to meet, on November 28, 2023, with the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, and it represents National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc. These two very impressive young women came to my office: Alma Arguello, who's with Brantford Native Housing; and Sarah McBain, who was with northern housing. They talked to me about the challenges that they face. Of course, this is urban housing for indigenous people, not on reserve.

The promise was made in 2019, I believe, for \$4 billion from the federal government to them. At that time, in 2023, they were still waiting. They were very concerned because the housing stock was deteriorating, and they indicated that the government seemed to try to conflate first nations funding and urban housing issues. It's almost like that same expectation: “Well, you already have money. It's over here, towards housing”, but that has to be spent on first nation reserves, so it was very confusing to them.

They talked about the barriers that CMHC placed on first nation communities, and they kept asking about this money. They had 60 signatories of indigenous housing organizations within NICH. They felt that Minister Fraser was continually stalling, and they were disappointed with his remarks that day. At that point, they just felt there was so much bureaucratic oversight.

They eventually got some funds from CMHC, and they suggested they start in Ontario. However, we know the housing circumstances in Ontario. They were given between \$150,000 and \$200,000. They said to me, “We couldn't even deal with the permits, let alone the cost of the housing”, which was going to be \$445, now up to \$550, per square foot. The money was not there. I don't believe it's there yet.

What do we do when we don't get the funding that is needed for urban indigenous folks? Of course, we heard from you, Mr. Ross, about the importance of that housing and that foundation.

I have zero seconds left.

• (1725)

**The Chair:** Maybe we can get a short reaction from Mr. Ross to this.

**Mrs. Cathay Wagantall:** How about 30 seconds each? It's a big deal.

**The Chair:** Let's ask Mr. Ross for a quick reaction, please.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** I'm not in my traditional territory. I live on the east coast, but my community is on the west coast. I'm living in an urban indigenous community. There's very little access to urban indigenous housing, period, let alone urban indigenous housing for veterans. Yes, it would be very helpful to have more resources for housing.

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

Now for five minutes we have Mr. Sean Casey.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Teillet, I don't have a question for you, but I want to recount this for you. Back when the House of Commons sat in Centre Block.... One of the nicest things you get to do as a member of Parliament is that when people come up to Ottawa, you're able to give them a tour. It was even more so back when everything was in Centre Block. One standard thing that I did on every single one of those tours was to take them over to the Senate chamber, where the bust of James Gladstone was on display, and explain to them that this fellow was a senator before he had the right to vote. To a person, they were aghast to hear that.

I guess what I would say to you is that, after hearing your opening statement and your telling us about the history, which very much lines up with that example, to me it underlines the importance of your work.

Maybe I will add a question in there. What can the government do to help you in your work? Are there certain areas in indigenous military history that require more support? This is your chance.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Thank you for the question. I will say that it's a growing field, but there are a lot of gaps in the academic literature. I don't even think I could go into how many areas still need exploration. At the Canadian War Museum right now, one of our projects is looking at a renewal. The Canadian War Museum, where it sits right now, is coming up on 20 years there. I'm relatively new. I've been in my position for two years.

We are actually looking for ways to enhance diversity in the museum in our permanent displays. We're already doing it in our temporary exhibitions, but in our permanent displays, we want to see—of course, I do; that's why I'm there—more history on the contributions of indigenous and Black Canadians, which I know is part of your study. We're going through a process where we are reviewing what we have on display, what requires reinterpretation and what are potentially entire gaps, for example, things that are not included and are not on display, things that we aren't talking about enough. I'd imagine there needs to be a budget for this rather lofty project.

If there's an interest in the government to contribute to that, of course, I'm sure there would be great interest from us at the museum to be able to enhance, essentially, the educational tools, to enhance our exhibitions and to share with all Canadians and all visitors this really critical and important history.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you.

Mr. Ross, thank you for your service, and thank you for being here with us today.

In the course of your work and your advocacy, do you have occasion to deal directly with individual veterans who are struggling or in need of help from Veterans Affairs Canada?

• (1730)

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, I'm co-chair of Rainbow Veterans of Canada, as well as co-chair of the LGBT Purge Fund. In my role at Rainbow Veterans of Canada, I work directly with a number of veterans and some who need services.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** In the course of that frontline work, are you aware that Veterans Affairs Canada works with homeless veterans?

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, we're aware of that, and we've been able to refer veterans who have had difficulty. Again, once they get connected, the services that they're able to access are amazing.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** I expect that, either through your work or through your advice, veterans are advised that if they have served, it is as simple as reaching out to Veterans Affairs to determine what might be available to them.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes. The complications come when.... Particularly for people who are living with issues around mental health, sometimes that relationship piece is tough to build, so simply reaching out sometimes isn't that easy.

**Mr. Sean Casey:** Thank you very much.

I guess that underlines the importance of your work, which we very much appreciate, sir. Thank you.

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

[Translation]

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

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

Mr. Ross, you mentioned the lack of funding for indigenous veterans as compared with other veterans.

What is different? What exactly do you mean?

[English]

**Mr. Todd Ross:** I believe it's about support for the indigenous organizations, specifically for Métis organizations, to gather together. There are not a lot of supports for those organizations.

It's been a challenge for Métis governments to get support. I know that there are still negotiations with the Government of Canada and that the supports are building, but for Métis veterans specifically, it's been taking a long time, from my understanding, for the organizations to get supports so they can then work with Métis veterans specifically as part of the organization.

[Translation]

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

Would you say from your experience, Mr. Ross, that it's much harder for indigenous veterans to return to civilian life than it is for other veterans?

[English]

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, and I think it depends on the circumstances of the individual. I think that for some, it would be very easy to return, and those would be people who may have more resources. For other Métis veterans, connecting back into a society where Métis people from the very beginning have to face the effects of colonization, there are so many challenges already in place. As a veteran, you're also confronting all of those challenges, in addition to challenges simply because you're a veteran.

[Translation]

**Mr. Luc Desilets:** I have one last question for you, Mr. Ross.

Do you have the sense that a larger number of indigenous veterans are homeless as compared with other veterans?

[English]

**Mr. Todd Ross:** My assumption would be yes, simply due to the social determinants of health and because there are more issues affecting indigenous veterans. My assumption is that there would be a higher representation of indigenous veterans who are homeless.

[Translation]

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

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

Last up is Ms. Blaney.

[English]

You have two and a half minutes, please.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I love getting the last word most of the time.

Mr. Ross, I'm going to ask you one question, and then I'm going to ask one more question here in the room.

I really appreciated what you had to say about accessing services and how sometimes mental health can have an impact on a veteran's capacity to ask for help.

One thing that I've been pushing for is more training in trauma-informed care for VAC staff and perhaps even having specialized trauma-informed service providers who, when a complex case comes to them, have the training to deal with that and deal with those issues. I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts on whether that would be a way forward.

**Mr. Todd Ross:** Yes, absolutely. The challenge is that, when you go to a Veterans Affairs office, sometimes some of the caseworkers may be very proficient in trauma-informed care, but whether you get that case manager or not is a bit of a gamble. The challenge, particularly for the veterans we've been working with, is trying to identify if there is somebody in that particular office who's going to be able to assist in a safe way, trying to identify who those people are and trying to get the person in front of them.

• (1735)

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** Thank you. That's so helpful.

My last question is for Ms. Teillet. I forgot to say last time that the Canadian War Museum is my favourite museum. I've been there several times. I'm not just saying that as a compliment. I find it such a powerful museum, and it's so educational.

I want to come back, though, to the part about reconciliation being more about action. I believe that a huge part of reconciliation is education, because a lot of the racist comments that people make are based in their total lack of understanding.

How could this committee and Canada incorporate indigenous history in a way that honours reconciliation? We need a recommendation for this. I would really appreciate your thoughts.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** That's a fantastic question. Thank you.

I don't know if I have an answer at the tip of my tongue.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I'm hitting you with the difficult questions.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Yes, you're really hitting me with the most difficult questions here.

**Ms. Rachel Blaney:** I know my time is almost up, but could you consider that and maybe send a response back to the committee? I think it is really important. You could see that people were shocked by some of the history you told us today in the committee, and I think that is part of the importance of reconciliation, bringing a hidden history forward so that it's no longer an indigenous story but a Canadian story, and I don't think we've made that transition yet.

If you could just think from that historical lens and give your thoughts to us, it would be really appreciated here in this committee.

**Ms. Danielle Teillet:** Absolutely. From a museum perspective, obviously, I think that the War Museum is moving in that direction, especially with the creation of my position and the work that I'm doing there. That's a real effort to try to do these things. We hold programs on Indigenous Veterans Day, when we try to elaborate on this stuff.

I don't know if, right off the top of my head, I have a recommendation for the committee, so I'll give that some thought.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Do not hesitate to send the clerk any additional information—you too, Mr. Ross.

I'd like to thank you for your appearance.

In our audience today, we have some young people. I'm pretty sure they know a little bit more about indigenous veterans because they were here with us for an hour. Don't forget that, before you leave, you're going to have to do the exam.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** On behalf of all members of the committee, I'd like to thank both of the witnesses.

[Translation]

We had with us Todd Ross, as an individual, and Danielle Teillet, a historian at the Canadian War Museum.

I'd like to thank our technical team, interpreters, clerk and analysts.

The meeting is adjourned.







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