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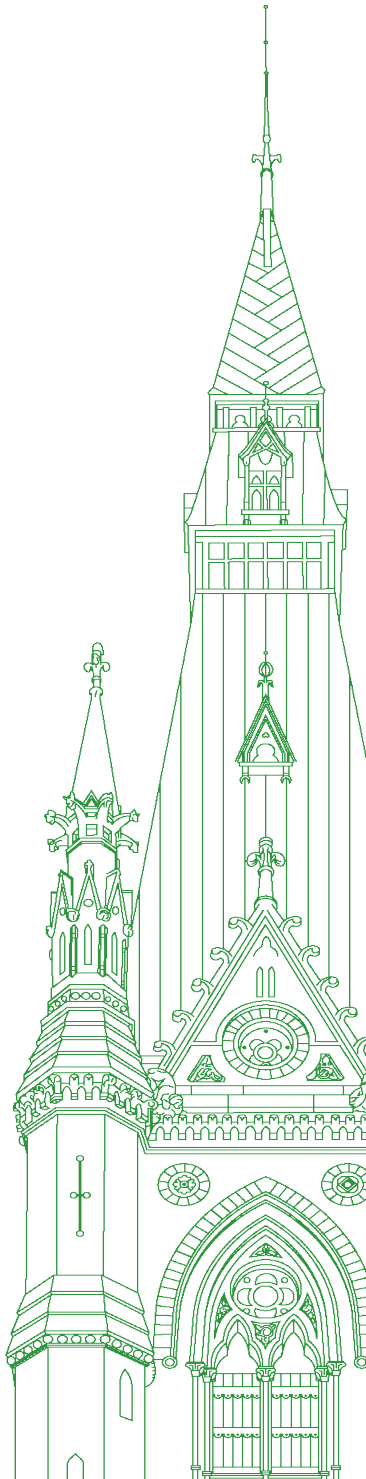

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, November 21, 2024

● (1110)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting 116 of the House of Commons Standing Committees on Veteran Affairs.

[*Translation*]

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

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Today, we will unfortunately not be able to hear from Ms. Lynne Gouliquer. She is unable to give her presentation or answer questions, because the sound is not ideal for the interpreters. However, she will still be able to attend this meeting.

That said, we have a witness with us in person.

[*English*]

From the Canadian War Museum, we have Dr. Michael Petrou, historian, veterans' experience.

[*Translation*]

I welcome you, Mr. Petrou. You have five to six minutes to give your presentation. Members of the committee will then ask you questions.

You have the floor.

Dr. Michael Petrou (Historian, Veterans' Experience, Canadian War Museum): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you all for having me. As the chair said, my name is Michael Petrou. I am a historian of the veteran's experience at the Canadian War Museum.

I spent the last three years at the museum leading an oral history project called "In Their Own Voices", which explores the postwar and post-service lives of Canadian veterans and their loved ones. It's not a history of war; in other words, it's a history of the ripples of war and of military service. We wanted to better understand how veterans and their loved ones are shaped by their service.

To this end, I have interviewed more than 200 veterans and their relatives, from a 104-year-old veteran from the Second World War to much younger returnees from Afghanistan and Iraq and veterans of peacetime service. These interviews, totalling hundreds of hours, were conducted by phone and Zoom, but mostly face to face, in kitchens and living rooms across the country. They reveal that, for many veterans, the war continues long after the rest of us stop paying attention. They reveal that the impacts of service continue in ways that are profound, intimate and far-ranging, cascading across decades and sometimes generations.

I can share a bit of what I've learned in the course of this research with you today. However, I would encourage you all to consult the "In Their Own Voices" online exhibition. It contains 50 excerpts from those interviews but also access to all 200 interview transcripts through the museum's military history research centre. This is an incredibly rich resource. Again, there are hundreds of hours of interviews. Our hope is that it will be of use to members of the public, researchers, scholars, students and family members. It is also designed precisely for the sort of work that you're all undertaking. I hope you'll make use of it, and I hope that it will help.

Since this committee is focused on the experiences of Black and indigenous veterans, I should note that approximately 26 of the "In Their Own Voices" interviewees are indigenous and 11 are Black. We also have testimonies from Asian, South Asian, Arab, Muslim, Jewish and LGBTQ+ veterans and loved ones.

I can speak to some of the common themes that have emerged with Black and indigenous veterans, but I should begin by noting that many if not most of the most deeply held and deeply felt experiences of Black and indigenous veterans are common to veterans of all backgrounds, of all eras and of all wars and periods of service.

Everybody is shaped by their service. The transition from being a service member to being a civilian is a profound one, often meaningful, sometimes unsettling. I recall one veteran of Bosnia and Afghanistan who likened the process of becoming a civilian again to crossing a bridge from one bank of a river to the next. The near bank is familiar. It feels safe. You know people there and they understand you, but you need to get across to the other bank, which is not familiar. You haven't been there since you were a teenager, maybe. It's forbidding, but you know you need to push yourself across that bridge. Eventually you reach the far bank, and with luck and support you become comfortable there.

I think we can divide some of the challenges surrounding the transition to veteranhood into two main clusters. There's the practical challenge of finding a job, maybe health care, a place to live. Then there is the emotional transition. Your identity changes. You are now separated from people that you could rely on completely, that you trusted with your life. You might not have liked them, but you love them. They understood you. Now you're surrounded by people who don't really understand you or what you've done. This can be disquieting. This can be lonely.

The challenges surrounding this transition are common across...again, regardless of background, regardless of whether the veteran is Black or indigenous, regardless of the era they served in.

● (1115)

I think often of a veteran of Afghanistan who described coming home from the war. There was a family gathering, a birthday or something like that. He was at the table. Someone mentioned the name of one of his comrades who had died, and it became too much for him. He started to cry, and he had to leave the table. His grandfather followed him into the hallway, simply put his arm around his shoulder and said, “It's okay. I understand.”

Now his grandfather was usually a boisterous type, so this was out of character, but his grandfather was a veteran of the Second World War, so their wartime experiences were separated by decades, by a vast distance, but they shared that most intimate, most unique, most profound experience of losing people close to them in combat. As a result, they understood each other despite these differences in a way that perhaps other people couldn't.

There are certain themes that are unique to Black, indigenous and other racialized service members as well. One is using veteranhood as a tool for social mobility and for advancing social and political equity. I think of Chinese and Japanese Canadian veterans of the Second World War who used their veteranhood as a tool for advancing postwar equity.

I should say that this is not equally effective. Many indigenous veterans of the Second World War did not have access to the same sort of veterans charter settlements after the war. Nevertheless, many of the postwar political leaders in first nations were veterans, and that continues to be the case today.

Black interviewees spoke often of veteranhood as a way of proving their families' bona fides, that they belong in this country either because of their own service or because of their family's service.

Another common theme concerns the tensions or the wrestling between levels of discrimination inside the service and outside. One Black veteran described the process of leaving the military after many years, where he felt more judged on his merits as opposed to the colour of his skin, and returning to Canadian society where racism was more profound. He described that as a culture shock.

I should say that this equity is, of course, not uniform. It's not attested to by all veterans. Some speak of discrimination even amongst fellow veterans when they return to civilian life. One indigenous veteran recalled the feeling that he was good enough to die beside his non-indigenous service members but not good enough to have a drink with them in the Legion.

I know I'm running out of time, but permit me to speak briefly to two themes that I think are perhaps unique to indigenous veterans. They're both related to the role of indigenous veterans in their communities. At the risk of overgeneralizing, I think the role of a veteran in indigenous communities is often unique and perhaps more important than in non-indigenous communities. We see this reflected, for example, in the grand entries in prairie powwows. This comes with greater prestige but also responsibility and attendant stress.

The last theme I'd like to mention concerns questions about being an indigenous veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces when Canada hasn't always treated indigenous people well or fairly. As one indigenous veteran put it, “We fought under a flag that didn't always protect us.”

At least two indigenous veterans spoke of being called a traitor for serving in the Canadian military. One responded by saying that he felt sorry for the person who made this accusation, because that person would never know the love and the joy that he felt from service.

Everybody has different reasons. Certain indigenous veterans have spoken of serving because of their love for the land. I think often of an indigenous veteran from down east, a Mi'kmaq, whose explanation was rooted in history. He said that his people had signed treaties with the British Crown and now the Canadian Crown. By serving, he was simply upholding his end of the bargain. I think there's an implication there about upholding the other end of the bargain as well.

I'll end there.

Again, I conducted hundreds of hours of interviews, and there's a lot more to talk about.

I'm happy to answer any questions you have. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Michael Petrou.

We still have a problem with Ms. Gouliquer.

We're going to start the first round of questions. I invite Mr. Terry Dowdall to the floor for six minutes, please.

Mr. Dowdall, go ahead.

● (1120)

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today for part of our Black and indigenous veterans study. It's unfortunate that one is not going to be on here. Anyway, you're going to probably get lots of questions, so be prepared.

Dr. Petrou, your opening remarks were interesting. You said, for the most part, that most of the issues are common to all veterans and were mostly shaped by service. Then you went on to say as well that you had 11 Black and 26 indigenous respondents. Can you just elaborate on that quickly?

I know that you had a few more comments from indigenous veterans. What were some of the bigger issues within the Black community that you heard? You had 11 respondents.

Dr. Michael Petrou: Sure. Again, I can only speak to the 11 and what I learned from those interviews. I think everybody's experience is different.

A common theme that emerged amongst Black veterans was certainly the idea of service as a path for social mobility. One veteran spoke of coming home—perhaps this is not so much about social mobility as it is about social change—and as a result of what he perceived to be greater levels of equity inside the armed service, he was motivated to push against unofficial segregation and some of the discrimination in his own community in Nova Scotia.

Another common theme that emerged was this idea of veteranhood as a path to social mobility. Veterans, including family members, in interviews would point to the service of perhaps an ancestor who fought in the First World War. I'm thinking of two Black interviewees. If your grandfather or great-grandfather served in the First World War, or in this case fought at Vimy Ridge, that's kind of your ticket to belonging here. It shouldn't be, but when your identity as a Canadian is questioned, you have this tool to push back: This is what my family has done. We've been here since after the American Revolution. We've served here, here and here. We served at Vimy Ridge, for goodness' sake. This is a talisman—proof that we belong here.

That was a common theme. There's a third one I would point to. Again, different people have different experiences. I'm not suggesting that the armed forces was painted as an idyllic, racism-less place, where racism was absent, but there was this shift of being in Canadian society and then in the military society, and feeling one could thrive more based on their own merits in the military. That would then lead to some of the perhaps uncomfortable transitions that, when you leave the military, you're back in Canadian society and that greater equity is gone. I mentioned the veteran who called it a culture shock.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: In your study, “In Their Own Voices”, from talking with as many people as you did.... One thing I often think about when we're sitting here in this committee is that there's their service, when they're actually deployed as part of the Canadian Armed Forces, and then they deal with Veterans Affairs.

Did you find in your discussions with Black, indigenous and probably all veterans in your study that the equality they experienced—or the inequality, I guess, that they experienced—in the CAF carried on in their actions with Veterans Affairs after leaving the military?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think certain frustrations with Veterans Affairs are common amongst all veterans, but I've also heard positives and gratitude. I'm thinking specifically of a couple of indigenous veterans right now who've had help from Veterans Affairs with that transition in terms of counselling and other forms of assistance.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Could you highlight what those issues are that perhaps weren't up to the standard they that should be—

Dr. Michael Petrou: No, I'm not saying that. I'm thinking of more positive reflections. I'm thinking of a veteran who spoke positively of the military and then Veterans Affairs helping them battle alcoholism, for example, during the transition out of service into veteranhood. A number of veterans have spoken about how they have benefited from counselling provided through Veterans Affairs to deal with PTSD, for example. This is constant across indigenous, Black, non-indigenous or non-Black veterans.

Again, certain veterans have expressed frustration—

● (1125)

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Is there a common feed in that frustration? That's what we're trying to probably—

Dr. Michael Petrou: I should be clear that the majority of these interviews centred more on the emotional and identity transition of veterans. I would not feel qualified to critique specific policies pertaining to veterans and where they fall short or where they do well. I can talk about some of the criticism that veterans have voiced. These are often very specific. They're about access to health care or certain benefits, and levels of disability, but on the nuts and bolts of policy, I'm not in a position to dive into that.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: To go back to your project, “In Their Own Voices”, can you outline probably the most important support factors for veterans—and their loved ones, who are often not thought of to quite the same extent—that allowed them to transition post-service and to successfully continue to contribute here in Canada?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I can try. To be honest, though, I'm not sure if it's something the government can solve. I think the biggest challenge is the loneliness. It's a dislocation. You go from one community to another community. I remember one veteran who lives in Ottawa. He said that he lives in a city of a million people, and nobody knows what he did. That's disquieting. There's a certain dislocation there.

I don't know if the government can solve that. We live in a society where most Canadians have spent the last 10 years trying to forget that we ever were in Afghanistan, but veterans who were there have not forgotten, and that continues in their lives. There's that disconnect between the lived experience of veterans and—

Mr. Terry Dowdall: We need the public to learn about the sacrifices that they made. I think we need to do a better job.

Dr. Michael Petrou: Yes.

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

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

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

Thank you, Dr. Petrou.

I was reminded of this when you spoke. My father was a World War II veteran. When they went to World War II from India, some called them traitors too, because they had a colonial power and they were fighting for the colonial power. They felt very similar to what your contractual relations were saying. They got the colonial power out post-World War II and subsequently, in Canada and in other places in the Commonwealth, they were able to get the right to vote post-World War II, so they earned that right.

Very similarly, I noticed you spoke about some people not feeling welcome in Legions and in other places in Canada. I remember the incident at the Newton Legion in Surrey, way back when they wouldn't allow Sikhs with turbans to enter because they said it was disrespectful to the Queen. However, the Queen was actually very cordial. She later invited all four of them to have tea and to say that it was not disrespectful to her. Many ethnicities and nationalities have gone through this, and it reminds me that we haven't moved far enough.

Can you share a few examples from the project that highlight the contributions of Black veterans and their struggles for recognition in Canada?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think Kathy Grant will be speaking to the committee after me. She might be in a better place to speak to that.

I should say, just again, with the effort of fully reflecting these interviews, there are at least two Black veterans I can think of who were trailblazers in terms of what they accomplished. While being proud of that, they were also uncomfortable with being singled out, as they put it, as the first Black this or as the first Black that. Certainly, I've been lucky to speak to Black veterans who were at the forefront of change, whether that was as the first Black woman who was a fighter pilot or whether they were the ancestors of some of the few Black First World War veterans.

Again, there's pride in that, but to fully reflect what's been told, there are Black veterans who are, again, proud of what they accomplished as Black veterans, but maybe they're perhaps a bit uneasy about being singled out for being Black.

I'm trying to capture the nuances of these interviews. People's experiences are deeply felt, but they are also highly personal. I'm trying to highlight certain themes, but I'm also a bit cautious about painting an all-encompassing picture, if that makes sense.

● (1130)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Moving on to indigenous peoples, they've had a long history of military service. In your research and in your work at the museum, how would you say the experiences of indigenous veterans differed, from the World Wars to later conflicts, due to their cultural or societal backgrounds?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I'm thinking of David Gamble, a veteran from around 1990 to 1996, who served as the grand chief of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association. He's the one I mentioned who talked about serving “under a flag that didn't always protect us”. Regarding the post-Second World War veterans charter, the legislation was not restricted to certain ethnicities or backgrounds in writing. In practice, though, when it came to access to land, grants and finances, indigenous people did not benefit to the same degree non-indigenous people did. Mr. Gamble's words were that they were given land that already belonged to them on the Beardy's reserve in northern Saskatchewan, for example. It wasn't an explicitly racist legislation, but in practicality and in terms of access and benefits, it was different.

I think there's a rather clear line between the veteranhood and the service of Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian veterans, who were explicitly campaigning for redress later on—that's in the case of Japanese Canadian veterans—but also just for political equity in the immediate postwar era. Again, that was proof of service.

Because a lot of indigenous veterans returned to reserves, you didn't have that same immediate impact. However, in terms of cultivating the leadership group, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, many of the postwar first nations political leaders were veterans, and we see that today.

I'm thinking of one veteran in particular who described how he grew up. He was a residential school survivor from northern Saskatchewan. For him, the experience of serving was, as he put it.... He was the only indigenous person in his unit, but he realized he was as good as anybody else and thrived in the military. That confidence carried through to his post-service civilian life. He was not necessarily politically involved, although he was a political leader, but it was in terms of business and educational success. His service was an inflection point, a transition that acted as a sort of boost.

Again, that's not unique to indigenous or Black veterans. So many Second World War veterans I talked to—I interviewed 40 of them—said, “Look, I had a grade four education and my life was going along this certain trajectory. As a result of the postwar veterans charter and the skills I learned in service, I acquired these skills and then my life went off in another way.” One veteran of the Second World War became a doctor. He practised into his nineties. That was a future that was not open to him until the Second World War—until the educational opportunities opened up as a result of that.

It is often an inflection point—this transition zone where one's life veers off in a way it might not have done or been heading in before. There are elements unique to Black and indigenous veterans, but that's also a common theme for all veterans we interviewed.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Monsieur Petrou.

[*Translation*]

For the next six minutes, the vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Luc Desilets, will ask you questions.

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

Good morning to all my colleagues.

Mr. Petrou, thank you for being with us.

What proportion of the 200 interviews you conducted involved Black or Métis veterans?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think I did interviews with 11 Black veterans and their loved ones and 26 interviews with indigenous veterans. There were two Muslim veterans, one Arab veteran, one veteran from Asia and four or five Jewish veterans.

● (1135)

[*English*]

I'm sorry. I'm going by memory here.

As best as I can recall, there were 26 indigenous and 11 Black veterans. We had veterans from South Asia, one Palestinian veteran and, as best as I can remember, five or six Jewish veterans, two Muslim veterans and quite a few LGBTQ veterans—specifically, I think seven or eight from the purge. I'd have to count up the francophones.

We tried to reflect the diversity of Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very well. Thank you for the exact numbers.

So, to summarize, approximately 20% of the veterans you met with were indigenous, Black or Métis.

Dr. Michael Petrou: Yes, it's about 20%.

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's perfect.

I have an easy question: Do you think the way they were treated in the army was the same as how white people were treated?

[*English*]

Dr. Michael Petrou: Perhaps it was closer to being equal in the army than outside the army. That's what was told to me.

Again, veterans who were Black and indigenous spoke of discrimination inside the military, absolutely, but if I can generalize, I think the recollection that was conveyed to me was that there was less racism, and they were more likely to be treated based on their own skills and merits than on the colour of their skin inside the military than outside.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you think that indigenous, Black or Métis veterans were treated the same as white veterans by Veterans Affairs Canada?

[*English*]

Dr. Michael Petrou: I don't feel qualified to answer that. I'm sorry. I know you'd like a response. When I cast my mind back on the 200 interviews, there were complaints about treatment from Veterans Affairs, absolutely. To the best of my recollection right now, I can't recall any veteran who suggested that where their treatment from Veterans Affairs fell short was as a result of their being Black, indigenous or Métis, or indeed their background.

Now perhaps I should highlight here the experiences of the LGBTQ veterans and the purge. There were legal struggles and efforts to obtain an apology from not Veterans Affairs but the government, and that was obviously related to identity. However, when I cast my mind back to the Black and indigenous veterans, I can't recall any suggestion or any accusation where Veterans Affairs fell short and it was related to their indigeneity or their being Black.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right. I will put the question in another way.

Do you think Black, Métis or indigenous veterans are recognized appropriately by the public and the government?

[*English*]

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think it's changing. We're trying at the museum. There's always work to be done, but I think we have highlighted and we continue to highlight certain undertold stories. We recently made additions regarding Black soldiers in the First World War to our permanent galleries.

I think there have been some broader efforts across Canadian society to recognize veterans who were not recognized, and I would extend that to include women as well. Certainly we've spoken to a number of Second World War women veterans who talked about being forgotten, moving back into civilian life and not being welcomed at the Legion the same way the men were.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I think that indigenous veterans are especially recognized in their own communities, perhaps in a way that doesn't happen in non-indigenous communities.

Again, I think it's changing. The museum, I hope, is part of those efforts of trying to shine a light on these undertold stories. Within their own communities—I am thinking of Acaciaville in Nova Scotia—there are efforts amongst the long-standing Black community to recognize some of these undertold stories.

It's certainly happening within first nations and within individual communities, and I think and I hope within some of the larger national institutions such as the War Museum. We're trying. We're doing our best and I think we're—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You said earlier that these veterans, who represent a proportion of about 20%, were not—

● (1140)

[*English*]

Dr. Michael Petrou: I'd like to recount, but probably—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: It might be somewhere between 10% and 25%; it does not matter. It's not a problem, I just wanted an idea of the proportion.

So, you said these veterans were not welcomed or accepted in the Legion. That was in the past. Is it still the case for veterans today?

[*English*]

Dr. Michael Petrou: I don't think it was ever the formal case. I mentioned one. It was an indigenous veteran and the son of a very highly decorated indigenous veteran of the Second World War, who, again, spoke of this idea that you enjoy a greater sense of equity inside the military. His words were, “We're good enough to die beside, but we're not good enough to share a drink with in the Legion”, but he wasn't speaking of a formal Legion policy. I think he was speaking of social ostracism or exclusion.

Second World War veteran women did speak about the challenges of accessing the Legion in the postwar years, yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Now I invite Ms. Rachel Blaney to take the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Dr. Petrou, for being here today, for being our sole witness and for answering all of our questions.

What your testimony caused me to contemplate and think about is this: First of all, it's very hard to speak on behalf of other people. You witnessed the stories, but you haven't lived the experience. I thank you for trying to reference the voices you've heard, and I accept how hard it can be to make those voices clear when it's not your lived experience.

You talked about using service to belong and how, even though they experienced racism in the military, often, when they left the military, there were experiences while reintegrating back into Canada—re-experiencing a level of discrimination they weren't necessarily used to in the military.

You also talked about how they—not all, but a lot of them—want to be noticed for their service but not noticed because they're an indigenous or a Black person providing that service.

Dr. Michael Petrou: A couple of individuals said that specifically.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes, but I think what I'm trying to get at is that these things are very complex and, as you said earlier, very individual.

I'm wondering whether you could talk about your listening to some of the testimony about belonging, since 26 or 11 isn't a huge group. It's hard to make all of these assumptions about the whole in that way. However, I'm very fascinated by the idea of using service to belong and whether you heard that from non-indigenous or non-Black people when talking about using the military to belong.

Can you tell us if there's any nuance or difference there?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think, in Canada.... Look, a Black child, for example, is more likely to face questions, some of them well intentioned and some, perhaps, malevolent. You know, it's “Where are you from?” and “Where is your family really from?” Again, I'm speaking about a couple of the Black veterans whose families came here after the American Revolution. A Black individual in Canada, of course, is more likely to face those questions than someone who has lighter skin. I don't think that's a controversial opinion. Someone who is not Black, indigenous or brown won't have that same sort of pressure to prove they belong here. It's assumed they belong based on the colour of their skin.

The idea of using veteranhood or service as a path to social acceptance and belonging is unique to indigenous and racialized veterans. Again, it's a path to social mobility for poor people. Everyone's life gets changed, sometimes for the better. I'm often cautious, because these interviews reveal trauma and some of those cascading impacts. However, I also recall a woman veteran of Afghanistan. She said, “Look, because I'm a woman who served in Afghanistan, everyone expects me to say that war was hell and that I'm broken.” She said, “No, many of us are happy with what we did.” That inflection point or shift can be a positive one. It is a path to social mobility and post-service workplace skills for veterans, regardless of their background.

I think what I'm arguing and what I think is reflected in these interviews is that, in terms of veteranhood or service as a pathway to acceptance as a Canadian and to belonging, despite looking different, is that it's unique to racialized veterans in a way it's not to white veterans. I think I'm comfortable saying that.

● (1145)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

I also want to ask this: You talked about speaking with 26 indigenous veterans. I know there are Métis, Inuit and first nations.

Are you able to get back to us on what that is? I don't expect you to have it off the top of your head.

Dr. Michael Petrou: I think I have it off the top of my head.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Okay, if you do—

Dr. Michael Petrou: I will, as best as I can.

You're right. There might be one or two more than 26. I'm including Métis veterans or their family members there.

Unfortunately, I've not yet interviewed Inuit veterans. I don't believe I've interviewed any. Anyway, there are gaps.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Yes.

Dr. Michael Petrou: The north is a gap that we're hoping to fill. There are 26 first nations and Métis, and so far no Inuit.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. That's really helpful.

You talked about their reintegrating back into society and some of them experiencing discrimination in a more poignant way, let's say. What I find interesting about that is that we've heard, especially from indigenous veterans, that when they are accessing services from VAC, sometimes there are people who are not trained well who react to them with some very racist comments about things that are just completely inappropriate.

On the broad idea that Canada can sometimes not be as friendly to people from these communities, do you ever hear anything specifically about services they're trying to access where they experience discrimination based on their indigenous status or their Black status?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I don't question the testimony of other witnesses, but that's not something I encountered in my interviews, no.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now have two more interventions of five minutes each.

I invite the first vice-president of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, to go ahead, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks.

First, I'd like to move the motion that I had put on notice on Monday. It reads as follows:

> Given that:
>
> a. During a recent Remembrance Day ceremony at Sir Robert Borden High School, the school played an anti-Israel protest song associated with the ongoing war in Gaza instead of playing music associated with the service and sacrifice of Canadian service members; and
>
> b. The principal of the school defended the choice, complaining that Remembrance Day is too often about "a white guy who has done something related to the military".
>
> The committee report to the House its opinion that the principal of Sir Robert Borden High School should be terminated for his actions.

I don't want to spend a lot of time on the motion, as I do have some questions for our witness, but I would like to say something in relation to it.

When I go and speak to schools in my riding and elsewhere, one of the most important things I do is teach the students about how important it is to honour and remember the service and sacrifice that has given them the right to be there in school and learning, about how some children in other parts of the world don't get those opportunities and about how important it is for them to remember that the very opportunity for all of us around this table to be here to serve, to be representatives of the people in our communities, is because of that service and that sacrifice.

I can't imagine anything more damaging to ensuring that the next generation remembers and understands that than for a school to dishonour the Remembrance Day service and to make anything other than the sacrifice and service of those veterans and those still serving as the theme and the importance of that day. There's nothing more dishonouring to that memory than to make it about something else—some kind of protest or political message or whatever it might be. It should be focused only on service and sacrifice. That's all it should be focused on.

With that, I certainly hope that all members of this committee will be joining with me in condemning that terribly disgraceful kind of behaviour, standing up for our veterans and standing up for honouring the importance of remembrance.

I'll move that motion. I hope we can vote on it quickly and get to the witness.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Petrou, as part of our procedure here, I have to give the floor to members of the committee. You can stay here.

Who would like to intervene?

Mr. Randeep Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I haven't decided how I'll go forward on this, but I will say that it was highly inappropriate what happened there. Remembrance Day is supposed to be about veterans and the sacrifices they've made. I just think the jurisdiction of it is a provincial or municipal matter or a school board matter. I believe that's where it belongs. I don't think the appropriateness is necessarily in this place. We don't govern the principals. We have no sanctions on them. We have nothing where we could tell them what to do. I think it really falls in their purview. A school board should look into that, or else the government that mandates school boards, which is the province, needs to do that.

I will say that it was inappropriate to do that. Protest for other means is not an appropriate mechanism on a day of remembrance for veterans.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

Now, we'll go to Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm disappointed that we're taking up time when we could be dealing with a witness. He moved it in public. We could have just done that at a different time, but here we are.

Remembrance Day is a really important day to remember people who served our country. It is a time of great sorrow for so many families across the country. Educating young people about what that looks like and about the cost of war is tremendously important. I really don't condone the behaviour we saw there. It was not well thought out. I think that complex discussions always need to happen, but that is not the time or place for complex discussions. It's a time to honour the people who served us.

However, I won't be supporting this motion, because I don't feel it is the role of a committee to make that kind of judgment. I believe that when hard things happen, communities and the areas need to deal with it, and that is their sacred right. When we come in and impose something, as a committee that isn't part of the community, it just seems a bit odd.

Our voices, obviously, are all the same around the table, and I hope what is heard is that we don't believe that is appropriate behaviour. However, it isn't our job to tell people how to, as I think the motion says, fire someone. That is not our role as a committee. Perhaps the member could think about what our role is, which might be to have an opinion but not to tell people what the action should be.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Now let's go back to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: That is exactly what the motion does. It offers our opinion. If it isn't our place to offer an opinion about how veterans have been disrespected, and if it's not our place to stand up and be counted and to show that we are standing for our veterans, then whose place is it?

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Mr. Chair, I will agree with my colleagues, other than those from the Conservative Party. I thank the vice-chair for being sensitive to this situation. Very obviously, what happened was completely unacceptable. Using an anti-Israeli a song is embarrassing and scandalous. However, it falls under provincial jurisdiction, which is none of the federal government's business whatsoever. Let the right authorities act accordingly.

I myself was a school principal over the last 20 years. If I had seen a federal parliamentary committee get involved in managing my school, I would have found it funny at first, and then I would have found it scandalous.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

Everyone was able to speak to the motion. I therefore ask the clerk to call the vote on the motion moved by Mr. Richards.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 3)

● (1155)

The Chair: We therefore returned to our discussion with Mr. Petrou.

Mr. Richards, you have the floor. You still have three minutes left.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you.

I have about four questions and, as was mentioned, about five minutes to ask them, so I'll ask that you try to keep the responses to 30 seconds or less.

We've heard a little, including from you today, about indigenous veterans who were denied benefits when they returned home after World War I, World War II and, I think, Korea as well.

Would you say that they were set back compared to their fellow veterans who did receive greater benefits?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I want to be cautious about saying "denied". Again, there wasn't legislation preventing them from accessing it. This was more a result of circumstance, returning to reserves and not having access as opposed to being denied.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's fair enough, but would you still say that it would have set them back compared to fellow veterans?

Dr. Michael Petrou: I could speculate, but I think we all could speculate about having less access to certain education and buying land. However, I can't assert that with conviction or examples to back it up.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. That's fair.

For veterans returning to Canada after those wars, would you say that economic stability here at home in Canada would have played a role in ensuring a successful transition to civilian life after the wars?

Dr. Michael Petrou: Perhaps, and I think that all Canadians enjoyed a postwar economic boom. Again, to go back to the conversation with Mr. Dowdall, the greater help that the veterans of the Second World War had is that they came back to a country where 1.1 million Canadians had served. Those who didn't serve understood what they had gone through. There wasn't that isolation that there is for the younger veterans of Afghanistan.

It's still hard. Ninety-nine-year-old veterans I've spoken to have talked about PTSD using different vocabulary, and I recognize what they're saying, but they weren't isolated. They were surrounded by people who understood what they did and who often had taken part in those efforts.

The experience for veterans today is, I think, very different, because they're not surrounded by people who were part of that same effort. I think that dislocation is more profound, and perhaps being surrounded by people who understood them was even more helpful in the post-Second World War era than the economic stability that they were enjoying, as we all were.

Mr. Blake Richards: Certainly, there's no question that having supports is important.

Would you also say, though, that the idea that having access to timeliness in terms of getting those benefits is important in that transition to life after service?

Dr. Michael Petrou: Again, with a cautiousness that I don't feel entirely comfortable diving into the nuts and bolts of policy, I think that's a fair thing to say, but I say it with a lot of caveats. I'm not a policy person. What you say makes sense, of course, but I wouldn't go further than that.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's fair enough. That may answer the last question I have. Would you say that not having access to timely benefits and the fact that we have a cost of living crisis and a housing crisis in Canada would contribute to veterans struggling to make that transition to civilian life?

Dr. Michael Petrou: Again, I'd be speculating. I think I understand where you're going, and this is getting more into policy and perhaps politics, which is something I don't really feel qualified to speak to. You have my apologies.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's fair. I appreciate that. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

This brings an end to the first hour of the meeting, which we spent with Mr. Michael Petrou. I remind you that—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Mr. Chair, am I not also entitled to five minutes to speak? The Conservatives cannot be granted five more minutes without giving me the same.

The Chair: I understand, but the time we took to discuss Mr. Richards' motion used up some of our time with the witness. We have another panel of witnesses to hear from. Furthermore, I gave the member three minutes of speaking time, rather than five minutes, to be able to welcome the other witnesses on time.

● (1200)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I had questions for the witness.

The Chair: Did you want to say something else, Ms. Blaney?

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm just wondering if we could extend the meeting by a few minutes to accommodate all the needs.

The Chair: We are agreed to allow three minutes to—

Mr. Terry Dowdall: What about the next hour?

The Chair: Ms. Hepfner, you have three minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you so much for being here, Mr. Petrou.

I want to ask you this question because I spent more than 20 years as a daily journalist. I feel it's a career that never really leaves you. It becomes part of your intrinsic being. I know that as a parliamentarian now I use everything I learned as a journalist, all the skills that I gained over the years, to inform my work here.

Would you please tell us more about your history as a war correspondent and how that informs the work you're doing now with the museum?

Dr. Michael Petrou: That's a good question.

I did spend many years as a foreign correspondent. I have covered conflicts in Afghanistan, in Iraq, in the Middle East and elsewhere. I think some veterans are aware of that. I don't usually mention it, so I think most are not.

Journalists and soldiers are in war zones for fundamentally different reasons. I think that's important. Some of the people I have interviewed I knew from Afghanistan. There are certain elements of being a journalist in a war zone that are similar. For better or for worse, I do know what it's like to be shot at, and I do know what it's like to lose colleagues. Those might be similarities, but ultimately, we are in conflict zones for different reasons.

When I was under fire, I curled up in a fetal position at the bottom of a trench. I think that's perfectly understandable for a journalist. I think soldiers have different reactions. I would reluctantly say that perhaps it has given me a limited insight into some of the experiences that veterans have had, but I'd say it's very limited.

Perhaps being a journalist and simply having a long history of talking to people and, perhaps more importantly, knowing when to be quiet have been useful in this exercise, which I should say, if you'll permit me, has been enormously rewarding. I feel very lucky to have had the conversations that I've had, perhaps especially with the Second World War veterans, who we're sadly losing. The entire experience has been an enriching one, and I'm grateful for it.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I think that's exactly the point. Knowing how to listen and how to talk to people are key parts of journalism that we can bring to other careers.

Can you tell us what you hope comes out of this project called "In Their Own Voices"? Can you tell us more about how it affected the veterans to be able to have a platform to share their stories?

Dr. Michael Petrou: It's been difficult for some veterans to have these conversations. It has been painful. There have been a lot of tears. There have been a few hugs. The purpose was never to be validating; it was to explore. I think it has been a positive experience for some veterans, and it's been very difficult for others.

These are heavy, difficult conversations, but my dear hope is that veterans who do not participate in the project will hear their own stories, their own experiences, reflected in the voices of the veterans we did interview and who are part of the exhibition. I hope other Canadians, family members and non-veterans, through this exhibition, will perhaps have a deeper understanding of the experiences of people they may know or of veterans in general.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michael Petrou, on behalf of the committee and on my own behalf, I want to thank you for your contribution and for being here. If you have other things to communicate to us after the study you lead, do not hesitate to send us information through the clerk.

Ladies and gentlemen, we will suspend sitting for a few minutes, the time it will take to welcome witnesses for the next hour.

● (1200)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, we are resuming the meeting.

[*English*]

We have other witnesses with us for the second hour. I'd like to welcome them.

As witnesses we have, from Legacy Voices, Ms. Kathy Grant, historian, Black Canadian veterans' voices. From Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, we have Mervin Bouvier, minister of veterans affairs, and John Belanger, veteran.

I welcome all of you. You're going to have five minutes for your opening statement. After that, we're going to ask you some questions to go further.

I invite you, Ms. Grant, to start. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Kathy Grant (Historian, Black Veterans' Experience, Legacy Voices): Thank you.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your deliberations.

My name is Kathy Grant, founder of the Legacy Voices project, co-creator of the Black Canadian veterans's stories program and website, historian on the No. 2 Construction Battalion commemoration committee, and school and community educator on the struggles and accomplishments of the many Black Canadians who have served our country in military service since the War of 1812.

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Grant, but could you move a little bit closer to the microphone, please?

Thank you.

Ms. Kathy Grant: Is that better?

The Chair: Yes, that's great. Thanks.

Ms. Kathy Grant: My father was a veteran of the Canadian army and air force. He was an immigrant from Barbados. He specifically chose to come to Canada to join in the effort to defeat our enemies in World War II.

After an extensive career in public service, my father turned his attention to gaining and sharing a better understanding of the contributions of Black participants in the war effort. Before his death, he asked me to continue those efforts. I've done that, and I continue to do it. Others have contributed mightily to my research. Extensive work by the late Thamis Gale and his very large collection of research have been foundational.

Efforts by many veterans to share their stories and their understanding with me have proved invaluable. Family members of veterans have added to my research and my understanding. The collaboration of professional educators, military reserve personnel, multimedia journalists, student research assistants, Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian War Museum have greatly enriched my work. Of course, the work of your committee is focused on the contemporary experience of our veterans and how you might contribute to improving their experience.

What I want to tell you is that the past—our history—shapes the present. If we understand the past accurately and the present fully, we are better able to shape the future.

Going back 110 years, many Black Canadians and some others from the United States and the Caribbean devoutly wished to join the Canadian military in World War I. Some were successful in doing so, but many were refused enlistment for no other reason than their race. After two years of advocacy by Black clergymen and community leaders, and many obstacles and obstructions, No. 2 Construction Battalion began to take shape. It was an all-Black unit with white officers other than a Black honorary captain, the chaplain.

Eventually, about 600 members were sent to Europe in non-combatant support roles in forestry and construction. These efforts were no doubt important to the war effort, but there's no question that finding military roles for an entirely Black unit without providing them with weapons was somewhat founded on unreasonable ignorance and racism. As well, the numbers just weren't there. Nonetheless, the No. 2 Construction Battalion served Canada well and contributed to our eventual victory.

After much pressure from the Black community, primarily in Toronto and the area, a plaque was installed at Queen's Park in Ontario. Very little was heard about No. 2 for decades—almost a century.

As World War II commenced, like many other Canadians and Commonwealth citizens, Black men and women sought to join in military efforts to defeat the Nazis. At the time, and until 1942, the RCAF did not permit the enlistment of Black people. They said you had to be of pure European descent. The Canadian navy had a policy of exclusion. They said you had to be of the white race to get in. Only a handful of Black sailors were accepted—five out of the entire Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War—and only one was able to go overseas. Eventually, the RCAF relented. A number of Black enlistees, including my father, distinguished themselves.

You can read some of these stories on our website, Black Canadian Veterans Stories, at www.blackcanadianveterans.com, or on our Facebook page of the same name. On November 7 we also launched a new website on the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

Since World War II, the contributions of Black Canadians to our military have continued and grown when it comes to infantry, divers, medics, pilots, logistics experts, engineers, administrators, technicians, mechanics, transport and in fact every aspect of our army, navy and air force.

● (1215)

Unfortunately, many Canadians are less aware of the significant contributions, in history and in the present, of Black Canadians in our military service. Only very recently have some schools begun to include this information in the classroom. Accurate and thorough information is not widely available. Along with our fellow colleagues and professional friends, we are attempting to change this for the better.

As with many somewhat forgotten or ignored parts of history, misinformation, outright mistruths and limited research with little financial and moral support continue to limit our understanding. Many of our institutions and agencies, lacking knowledge themselves, have unknowingly contributed to the poor quality of public information and understanding of the significant contributions of Black military personnel. Real understanding breeds collaboration, co-operation and better results.

Contemporary Black veterans have told me that they do not always receive respectful, timely and helpful services from Veterans Affairs. Their friendships, inevitable conversations and service-quality comparisons with fellow veterans of other racial backgrounds have helped them understand that this is not a broadly based problem in all Veterans Affairs interactions with their clients generally. Rather, it's something that seems to impact the Black veterans more commonly. Does this have anything to do with the generally poor understanding of the historical and recent past contributions of Black military personnel? It very well may.

How do we move forward towards real acknowledgement of the contributions of all members, past and present, of our military services? As a historian and educator, I will offer what I know. We must better educate our schoolchildren and the general public. To do that, we need to expand upon the current base of mostly volunteer work in uncovering and promoting the history—the accurate and complete history—of Black Canadians in the military. We must also encourage the gaining of this knowledge within the Veterans Affairs staff. Respect, attentiveness and compassion are based, at least in part, on knowledge.

In closing, I must tell you that in Toronto, in my travels doing this work, I see army, navy and air cadets. I see more of them, girls and boys, of diverse racial backgrounds—many more. We have a recruitment challenge in our armed forces. Many of these cadets may, in the near future, be part of the solution. Let us prepare with real knowledge and understanding so that they might be encouraged to join professionally, sure that they will enjoy the personal and professional respect we ought to offer them, both in service and one day as veterans.

Thank you.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Grant, for your opening remarks.

Now let's move to Mr. John Belanger for five minutes.

Please go ahead, Mr. Belanger.

Mr. John Belanger (Veteran, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan): Good morning.

First of all, I'll let you know that I am a proud son of my late father, Leo, who landed on Juno Beach during the Second World War. I have an older brother who served 30 years. I myself did 27 years in the service.

I'm here representing Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, the official representative of section 35 rights holders in Saskatchewan. We are a government that operates for and by Métis citizens, dedicated to preserving and advancing the rights, identity and well-being of the Métis people. We are currently working to negotiate a modern-day treaty with the Government of Canada to advance the interests of our citizens, including our brave veterans and their families.

As the veterans representative for the MN-S, I will speak in regard to the things that matter to the Métis veterans. What is important to Métis veterans is predominantly the same as what's important to first nations and Inuit veterans. Some of these things are just sharing stories, supporting the veterans and their families, supporting the transition, and recognition where distinction is key. Indigenous people have always been left out of the history and the stories being told. A prime example is how few people know about the critical role of the code talkers. Métis have also had this plight, but to the degree that society and history have often taken a pan-indigenous approach in sharing the histories and achievements of our peoples, because we did fight alongside our first nations cousins, what's important is distinction and ensuring that our Métis pride is visible.

To this end, some of the key priorities in Saskatchewan include identifying veterans in Saskatchewan, building connections with them, helping them connect with each other and beginning to document and collect their distinct stories and experiences. I myself know that when we talk about anything to do with veterans, there is a cut-off when it comes to remote parts of Canada. There is a huge disconnect.

Thank you.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Bouvier, if you want to intervene, you have two more minutes.

Mr. Mervin Bouvier (Minister of Veterans Affairs, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan): Thank you.

I just want to reiterate the importance of culture and language. A lot of times culture and language are not taught enough in modern society. Where I come from, a lot of veterans came home, and a lot of times they didn't understand the culture that's been.... They understand the culture, but modern people didn't understand the culture of how to present themselves to the culture people, especially when it came to language or living, how they live with their culture themselves, so education is very important.

Mental health was a big issue. They forgot that mental health is passed on from the veterans themselves to their families, which is still the case today. Where I come from in the north, I've lived with veterans all my life. Most of them have gone, but some veterans still survive. They need a lot of support and mental health support.

We're trying to establish a booklet now to revise all the veterans that come from the Métis side and the first nations, so we're creating a partnership to create a booklet. We don't have enough funds, so we need the federal government to step up and help us out with the federal funds.

Thank you.

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

Now we're going to start the first round of questions for six minutes each. I invite Mrs. Wagantall for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you all for being here today. I really appreciate the opportunity to interact with you.

Kathy, I have a little quote here that I brought forward, and you really struck a chord with me on this. It's from Hilaire Belloc. His lifetime was from 1870 to 1953, and he said, “To comprehend the history of a thing is to unlock the mysteries of its present, and more, to disclose the profundities of its future.” In other words, we don't study history only to know what happened then. We study history to understand what's happening now and, of course, where it's going to go in the future.

I really appreciated what you shared with us. You talked specifically of the present and how you are seeing more Black young people engaged, with the cadet program as an example. That program is very precious to me.

What ideas do you have as far as encouraging more Black young people to engage in the cadet program?

Ms. Kathy Grant: It's not only Black. It's everybody.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Absolutely, I agree.

Ms. Kathy Grant: We find that when we show examples, pictures and images of our stories, and we encourage them to go and visit our website, they're amazed to see how much history is there. I know that yesterday or a couple days ago, we had 100 students come up from Ottawa. We were able to go and share the stories, and they were amazed to know how much of a rich history we have.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you so much for that work. I do hope that it brings about good results.

First of all, welcome from Saskatchewan. It's so good to have you here from my home province. I've been on this committee since 2017. In 2018, this committee travelled up to northern Saskatchewan, to Beauval. Now, I don't know if you consider that north when you look at the province, but it is to us. We also went to Yellowknife, and I had the opportunity to engage a lot more with indigenous veterans.

I just want to take a moment to say that Vimy Ridge would not have happened the way it did for Canada without the incredible mapping abilities and the commitment of our first nations, Inuit and Métis to that whole exercise. Instead of losing 100,000 soldiers, as France and England did, we were able to have victory there. I thank you and your past for that contribution.

You mentioned some of the frustrations that are still there from the past, and I know that, with World War II, promises were made that were not kept. Would you like to just speak briefly on that? Then, I have a quote I would like to have you respond to as well.

● (1230)

Mr. John Belanger: I will tell you that I do have a stepmother at home who has lived with us since I was a baby, a one-year-old. Unfortunately, my dad went to the Second World War, and when he came home, he was a bush pilot. He had an accident that lost my mother. I never knew her because I was just a young fellow, but this lady I'm speaking about now is alive and well. She took care of us when we were young.

There were lots of issues, when you think about it, on my father's side. We talk about PTSD all the time, and I stand here and tell you that I know he had PTSD, but he'd never admit to it because, back then, our home was so remote. I'm north of Beauval still—not very far north, but there's nothing there. Back then we had one highway, and half the time they walked.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I was going to say that I have comments from someone who knew Louis Roy—I don't know if you know who that is—who was a World War II veteran, and he told her that they walked for three days to get to Meadow Lake to be able to enlist.

Mr. John Belanger: Were you at Louis Roy's retirement a few years ago when they gave him that contribution, his payments for the Second World War?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I don't believe I was there for that. We were able to see that they had built a monument of sorts there to remember their service.

I did meet him, and he's a remarkable man. His story is real, though, and this is the thing. This is, I think, one that is passed down.

My friend Marj Matchee met him that day, and I think his story should be included in those stories you have mentioned. They came back and were promised land, and that did not come to be. It didn't come to pass. When I talk about history, that was in the past. It has been discussed that this needs to be dealt with, and it still hasn't been dealt with. I know that a lot of them are no longer here anymore, but certainly their families are still here.

There is a submission in the Conservative convention policy manual that indicates that it needs to be dealt with, and I do hope we're able to do that.

Mr. John Belanger: I didn't quite finish what I was going to tell you guys.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm sorry.

Mr. John Belanger: I'm going to say that, 30 years ago, when I spoke to my father—I came back to Saskatchewan while I was still in the service—I think the federal government offered him a compensation program of $10,000. This was quite a while ago. My dad said that he would take it, but it wasn't up to him. It ended up that he didn't get it. He told me, he said, “I will never see that money.” I told him I'd spend it for him but, of course, they granted it to my stepmother, which is great. He said that it was going to take too long to get payments, that it was just too much red tape, and it was. I think it was almost 20 years after he passed that he got something for it.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It was 20 years after he passed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Belanger.

Now I'm going to invite Mr. Bryan May for six minutes, please.

Go ahead, Mr. May.

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll be directing my questions to you, Ms. Grant.

First of all, thank you for being here.

One of the reasons I moved this motion to do this study was that I had the honour and privilege to represent the Minister of National Defence last year, almost a year and a half ago now, in Pictou for the commemoration and the remembrance ceremonies for the No. 2 Construction Battalion. I learned about the history, and I met a number of advocates and historians who shared the stories.

I agree with you. I think this comes down to education. I think it comes down to commemoration and filling that gap that exists currently.

I'm wondering if maybe you can speak to the efforts. I know that Minister Petitpas Taylor launched a call for organizations to apply. I think the initial rollout was about $370,000. I think that, as recently as November 7, an additional $500,000 is available for organizations to apply for programming that can really focus on that aspect of education. I'm wondering if you know of any of the organizations that would be applying or have maybe applied and what might come of that.

● (1235)

Ms. Kathy Grant: I think that last year it was $225,000, and $500,000 is for this year.

With regard to the $225,000, each group or organization was able to apply for up to $25,000. We actually applied, and we got $25,000. We launched our website on No. 2 Construction Battalion on the 7th. We partnered with York Region District School Board and with veterans to produce it, and I'm encouraging everyone to go and visit it.

There are a number of groups that applied. There's a group in British Columbia that applied. One of the members—her name is Door Gibson—is a retired captain.

I was a historian on the No. 2 Construction Battalion apology, and we worked with Library and Archives Canada to ensure that the records were digitized. The records were all digitized and available online prior to the apology, and just yesterday, they announced that it was made a UNESCO history of the world program. Teachers can go and get primary sources to share with their children.

Mr. Bryan May: Congratulations on that. That is an exceptional accomplishment.

I will also add, for anybody who is paying attention and watching these proceedings, that I believe it's until the end of January 2025 that applications are still able to go in for that $500,000—

Ms. Kathy Grant: It's, like, up to $50,000. A group of students from Ottawa came up a couple of days ago, and we encouraged them. We said, “You're a school. You're provincial, so you can apply for up to $50,000.”

The other.... I think it was the Catholic board, York Region in Toronto. It said that it is willing to go and work with other schools.

We're encouraging schools to apply, and we're happy to work with them.

Mr. Bryan May: With regard to a different event, I understand that you were invited by the French embassy in Ottawa to attend the 95th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. I'm wondering if you can share with us your experience and your take-aways from that opportunity.

Ms. Kathy Grant: We went there.

What many people are not aware of is that there was someone by the name of “Curley” Christian. Curley Christian lost all four of his limbs at the Battle of Vimy Ridge and survived. We happened to have with us his scrapbook from when he went over to Vimy, and we donated it to the Canadian War Museum. We also found out that his granddaughter, Anne Christian-Hansen, actually lives in Ottawa.

It was a great opportunity to go and share that story because many people are not aware that the only person who lost all four of his limbs at Vimy Ridge and survived was from here. That's even for the Commonwealth as well, so it's for both Canada and the Commonwealth.

Mr. Bryan May: Can you speak a little bit more about the opportunity to work with the Canadian War Museum?

I know that the 100th anniversary of the No. 2 Construction Battalion was in 2016, and they're working on.... We just had a gentleman from the—

Ms. Kathy Grant: You mean Michael.

Mr. Bryan May: —Canadian War Museum here.

I'm wondering if you can expand more on that.

Ms. Kathy Grant: For the 100th anniversary of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, we had a display at the Canadian War Museum. You can actually look it up on CBC. We were able to go and get descendants to share their stories.

I know that there's currently a quilt at the Canadian War Museum that has the members there.

Last week, we were there with Silver Cross Mother Agatha Dyer. She's there helping us, as well, in terms of promoting the story.

● (1240)

Mr. Bryan May: That's excellent.

I'm not sure if I have time for a question and an answer, so I'll just simply say thank you for being here and for the continued work that you're doing to recognize the battalion.

Ms. Kathy Grant: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bryan May.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor for the next six minutes to the committee's second vice-chair, Mr. Luc Desilets.

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

I thank all three guests for being with us.

There was something I found touching during your presentations, Ms. Grant and Mr. Belanger. Mr. Belanger, your name sounds very Quebecois, by the way. What touched me is that you are continuing the work of your parents in a way. That is especially the case for you, Ms. Grant. In your case, Mr. Belanger, you talked about it. It's really fantastic that you are able to continue this work and talk about it. It really touched me.

Ms. Grant, I have a few questions for you.

Why do you think your father had such a deep need or yearning to do research and make Black veterans' history known? Where did that come from for him?

Ms. Kathy Grant: I speak a lot more English than French.

[*English*]

I will speak in English.

My father came up from Barbados to volunteer to fight for Canada in the Second World War. He was in the Canadian Army as well as the Canadian air force. Before he passed away in 2005, he said, "Kathy, I want you to continue my legacy of telling the stories of our Black veterans." He also told someone by the name of Sarah Onyango to do the same thing. I met her at my dad's funeral. It's been 20 years, and we keep telling the stories, whether it's by engaging with the Department of National Defence or whether it's by engaging with Veterans Affairs to continue the stories.

It's a promise I made to my dad. I'm going to keep doing it, and my children are going to keep doing it as well.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I congratulate you.

Do you think Black soldiers' and veterans' history is documented well enough today? You continue to do it, but in general, is it documented well enough?

[*English*]

Ms. Kathy Grant: I don't know if I'm supposed to put this earpiece on or....

[*Translation*]

Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Yes, I will repeat my question.

Today, in 2024, is the history of Black soldiers and veterans sufficiently well documented, in your opinion?

[*English*]

Ms. Kathy Grant: Some people document it well. I know that for No. 2 Construction Battalion, I would say that greater than 70% of the information that's out there and that's published contains misinformation. There are very few people who actually have knowledge in that area. I find that, a lot of times, they're not the ones who are being consulted. There are very few people who actually have that knowledge. I find that a lot of people are copying and pasting information, and they do not have the knowledge.

People are saying that they defused landmines and that they removed men from the battlefield. There are many images out there of American soldiers, not Canadian soldiers. That is done by the media as well as by schools. We're trying to correct that. It's an ongoing process. I know that, with our new website, we will actually have a myths and misinformation page to showcase the information accurately.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: You are doing a lot, but in your opinion, whose responsibility is it to dig, spread the story and highlight the work of Black people? Is it up to Veterans Affairs Canada? Is it up to some other organizations in the private or community sector?

[*English*]

Ms. Kathy Grant: I would say it's everyone's responsibility to go and do it. I know through our group, Legacy Voices, we work directly with schools, and we encourage schools to share that information with other schools.

Last year, there was an Italian schoolteacher—I think he was with the Oscar Peterson Public School—and we shared the information with him. He got the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching, from working with No. 2 Construction Battalion information. We went to the Library and Archives Canada, and we were able to share that information with the students. The students were able to create websites for each individual soldier they researched.

I think it's everyone's responsibility. It's a shared responsibility. If we just keep telling people to learn one story and to share it, I think more people will know about it.

Thank you.

● (1245)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Congratulations on that award.

Earlier, you used an expression I had trouble understanding. You talked about unreasonable racism. What did you mean by that?

[*English*]

Ms. Kathy Grant: If you take a look at the records at Library and Archives Canada, you will see multiple examples. To give you one example, they were recruiting a person in Manitoba. He was a medical student. His name was Hewburn Greenidge. When he went to get examined, the military doctor said to the civilian doctor, "I'm glad that you are examining the nigger." Those words are right there at Library and Archives Canada. There are multiple examples in there. Some of the language you really can't present in schools. A lot of times you have to shade it out.

Those are some examples. There are at least 10 or 15 examples. When they went to be recruited in Toronto, and they asked if they'd be willing to accept a platoon, not a single group said that they would accept a platoon into their group. They went to about 75 of them. Those records are actually at Library and Archives Canada. They've already been digitized. Some would say that they were a kilted regiment and that they would draw the line when it came to getting Black soldiers, or that if Black soldiers came in, it would prevent white soldiers, or the proper soldiers, from getting in.

Those are some of the examples of racism that we saw. I know that members of the Black community wanted to serve and wanted to get in from the beginning. It was just the restrictions from the commanding officers who said no, but we do have some who went to Ypres and Vimy and whatever. We have examples.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The testimony is so interesting to me.

I want to thank you, Mr. Belanger, for your service.

I also want to thank you, Ms. Grant, for carrying on your father's legacy. I really appreciate that commitment and the generational commitment that you've made here.

First, Ms. Grant, we did have an indigenous veteran come to our committee early on in the study who spoke about having a space that is just for indigenous veterans to come together, to talk about their experiences, to share and to have VAC participate to learn more about what's happening within that community in terms of everything—the history and what the veterans are actually experiencing.

Do you think that would make sense for the Black veteran community as well? It would be a space where they could come together, share together and talk together, one where VAC could sort of learn from that how to better provide service. After what you just testified to, around clarifying history and correcting it when other sources are putting out incorrect information, that could be part of it as well.

Ms. Kathy Grant: I know that last year Veterans Affairs had an opportunity where they were getting the testimonies from what they called the BIPOC group—I hate that term—and then lumped together the Black veterans and the brown veterans. They said, no, they have their own separate stories to tell.

Veterans Affairs Canada then actually went out and had different sessions. They had members of the Black veterans community go and talk about and share what their experience was with Veterans Affairs. I think that was a very positive step. It was just recent. I haven't read any of the reports that came out of that, but many of the Black veterans we spoke to said they were very appreciative of that. They had found that sometimes, when they went to Veterans Affairs, they were not taken seriously. I think there's hope and there's promise happening going forward. I think as they share their stories and their experiences, things will change because they'll say what they need to make things better for them.

● (1250)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Something that's a little more regular, maybe, would be even more helpful to continue to bring those groups together. Having different people participate would just really educate VAC as to what those realities are.

Ms. Kathy Grant: I think individual groups know what their experience is. They don't want anybody else to go and tell their story. It belongs to them. This is their experience.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Mr. Belanger, I want to come back to you. You talked about the remote nature of a lot of the communities. We've heard from a lot of especially indigenous communities that, because they're so far away, it can be challenging to access service.

Mr. Bouvier, you talked about having culturally appropriate supports and services for people who are coming back.

Perhaps I could ask both of you to talk about the challenges of belonging to remote communities and accessing services and what would be culturally appropriate.

Mr. John Belanger: I refer back to the young lady who asked me this when she came up to Beauval. Back then, Louis Roy had to walk three days just to enlist. Well, it's a long way off the grid where I'm talking about. It's not off the grid now, because there are highways all the way there now.

The Legion is utilized by Veterans Affairs to bring information forward. We don't have a Legion. The closest Legion for us is two and a half hours away. We can't access it. It's difficult. We would need somebody to go to, as an example. Right now, even me, I can't go to a Legion. I have to drive there. It's two and a half hours to get there. If they don't have the information through Veteran Affairs, it takes a long time.

It was a huge disconnect when I got out of the service. I was hurt in the service. I did my thing through Veteran Affairs and, because of where I was living at the time, there were huge issues getting the services that I needed.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Mervin, I know you talked a little bit about language in trying to get some of those things back together and about providing supports that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. I'm just wondering if you could talk about what those gaps are and what you're trying to do to address that.

Mr. Mervin Bouvier: The language and cultural barriers sometimes affect a lot of our people who live in our communities. We live in about 18 communities on the northwest side. A lot of the time, people don't know the cultural side of people and how they are. They have a different way of presenting themselves in the cultural component and the language. You know, the code talkers were the ones who saved the war in World War II, I think, when Germany was fighting in World War II.

It didn't come back. That language didn't come back for us to find our identity. Instead, modern society kept going. It didn't give us that way of understanding our own language. Some of us continued on, and we have that barrier.

The main thing is to have workshops, services and programs within our culture and within our language and make people understand that's where the barrier is a lot of the time. Distribute programs, because we don't have anything in the cultural component. It's always on a modern component. We need to make sure that it's delivered so it's cultural and modern so that we both understand each other and come to the table at the same level.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Now we're going to have two interventions of four minutes each.

I invite my friend Fraser Tolmie for four minutes, please.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): I'm glad you're my friend.

Thank you to our witnesses for joining us today.

Ms. Grant, thank you for listening to your father, for respecting, sharing and being able to remember the past to honour him.

To our guests who have served, thank you for your service.

I know my colleague Ms. Wagantall mentioned Saskatchewan. Since I'm from Moose Jaw, it's great that we outnumber Ontario here. We're grateful for your presence, and that's why we're mentioning it.

Ms. Grant, my uncle was from Jamaica. When I was growing up, Black and white...it was just my family. It wasn't until you experienced some of the comments that are made by outside people.... It's somewhat disgusting, in my opinion. I'm grateful that you're here to be able to share.

One of the things that we as Canadians have prided ourselves on is the underground railway. What you're sharing with us today in your testimony is that we may have prided ourselves on the underground railway, but afterwards there's some work to be done.

I'd like to touch a little bit on what you were sharing with regard to the American media and what you were saying about how the portrayal of Black people in the Canadian military isn't exactly what it is in our own hearts and minds. What are you doing to combat that and expose what really happened?

● (1255)

Ms. Kathy Grant: I want to clarify that they're using American images of Black soldiers in Canadian media and publications. It's not the Americans, but the Canadians getting the information incorrect. No matter how many times we say not to use this image and they say they will not use this image.... Sure enough, even on Remembrance Day, CBC had an image of those same three Black Americans and had them labelled as from the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

It needs to change. I think there needs to be a site that says to not use these images in order for it to be.... I know that in talking.... I'm really happy to meet them from Saskatchewan because the oldest Black World War II veteran was born in a place called Tisdale, Saskatchewan, and his name is Alvie Burden. I think he lives in Vernon, B.C., and he's going to be turning 103 years old in January. He got funding. I think some liquid was poured on him. I think they got like $20,000. It was kind of like a gas or whatever, so he was able to benefit from that.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you for your answer.

Here is my next question: Canadians are using American media—I mean, our own CBC. What does that say about us, our not using our own historical pictures and documents? Is that a form of neglect?

Ms. Kathy Grant: I would say that the documents are mislabelled.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: They're mislabelled. Okay.

Ms. Kathy Grant: Sometimes they may not get the memo that it has changed. I know—whether it's from Library and Archives Canada, the Canadian War Museum or whatever—they had mislabelled images from maybe eight or nine years ago, and they've removed them and have the correct labelling. However, some people still have the wrong information. I think it is just making sure that this gets communicated to educators, and that's what we're doing with schools. We're saying, “If you see this image, don't use it.”

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Okay.

One of the things you touched on.... You know, I've served in the military, but I also was an air cadet and I loved the cadet program. It was a fantastic program, and I have seen cadets of different cultures and different backgrounds, which means that it's a very open organization. It's also a recruitment tool. I'd be interested to hear what your thoughts are with this government now reducing the budget for cadet programs.

Ms. Kathy Grant: I can't comment on that. What I can comment on is a person by the name of Dr. Stephen Blizzard, who worked very closely with the cadets. I think that just working with the cadets and just having them share their stories.... I find they're very respectful, no matter what colour they are, and they're just open. There's an openness and a willingness.

Even on Remembrance Day, when we had Agatha Dyer, the Silver Cross mother, there was a cadet who came up to her and wanted to know more about the story. It's sharing the story. I think the cadets themselves, whether the money is reduced or not, have that drive so that it will continue.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I also would like to welcome one of our colleagues, Mr. Matthew Green, who is replacing Ms. Blaney.

The last four minutes go to Mr. Sean Casey.

Please, Mr. Casey, go ahead.

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

Welcome to our witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Belanger, for your service.

I'd like to start with you, Mr. Belanger. I know that your organization recently had a commemoration for national Indigenous Veterans Day. Can you talk a bit about the ceremony and how your community marks that day?

Mr. John Belanger: What happens in our community during.... Are you talking about November 8?

Mr. Sean Casey: Yes.

Mr. John Belanger: Schools in our community hold a veterans day gathering for all the students. We have two schools and they each hold one on that day. When you go there, all the young ones at the elementary school—starting from kindergarten and going up—know what Remembrance Day is. Also, you go to the high school, and of course, they're going to know what Remembrance Day is. It is a huge thing. Then, on the actual day of remembrance, on November 11, our community gets together. They do their march, prayers and everything at the cenotaph that's in the middle of our community.

Mr. Sean Casey: I noted on your website that the ceremony is private for families and supporters. Is that, in fact, the case?

Mr. John Belanger: No.

Mr. Sean Casey: Okay.

Mr. John Belanger: We will invite anyone who comes out. We encourage people to come out. I will tell you that, in our community of Île-à-la-Crosse, the surrounding communities come to it because of the lack of participation within their own communities. It makes us very happy to have them come to our community.

Mr. Sean Casey: I'm looking at the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, and what struck me was the reference to a private ceremony for Métis veterans and their families on Indigenous Veterans Day. What struck me was that the private ceremony was livestreamed.

Mr. Mervin Bouvier: I think what you're talking about is Batoche.

Mr. Sean Casey: Right.

Mr. Mervin Bouvier: We had a ceremony there on November 8, and we had army veterans and RCMP from areas surrounding Duck Lake come together. It was an aboriginal ceremony to support us. That was Batoche, and it was to support the aboriginal, Métis and first nation veterans.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you for that.

Ms. Grant, I was interested in your comments around Black veterans' interactions with Veterans Affairs Canada. The comment, if I heard it correctly, was that, in conversations that Black veterans have with other communities, it's apparent to them that they're treated differently.

First of all, have I fairly characterized what you said? I wonder if you can speak a bit more to that and what you would suggest to Veterans Affairs Canada to make it better.

Ms. Kathy Grant: There were a few Black veterans I spoke to.... I wouldn't say that it's across the board. I think that they were very pleased to be able to have their voices heard as a result of what Veterans Affairs Canada did to modify their taking of the information. They have explained that they find that it is easier.

Also, they said that, when they're speaking with someone who might be a member of the Black community as opposed to someone who was not, there's a better rapport because they better understand the community and they better understand the culture. That might be something to be promoted to make sure that, when they call in, there's someone who might be from their community who better understands. That might not just be for the Black community. The indigenous community might have a better rapport or better understanding of certain things or certain language. That's what I would recommend.

● (1305)

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I do apologize for coming late, but, given some of the reflection of the testimony, I wonder if, through you, you might extend to the witnesses the opportunity that, if there are other veterans who have testimony for the good and welfare of this study, they might want to provide it in writing for the consideration of the final report. Other members who might not have been granted the opportunity to come could provide their remarks in writing for the benefit of the report.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I can also tell you that our clerk is doing extensive work to get in touch with different witnesses to have more information for our study, like we did for women veterans.

Now I'd like to say thank you to the witnesses on behalf of the committee and myself.

I start with you, Ms. Kathy Grant. I have to say that I'm also a follower of your Facebook page. She's a historian from Black Canadian Veterans Voices.

From Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, we have had with us Mr. Mervin Bouvier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouvier holds the position of Minister of Veterans Affairs. From that same nation, we also had with us a veteran, Mr. John Belanger.

With that, do members of the committee want me to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I thank the interpreters, the technicians, the clerk and the analyst.

The meeting is adjourned.