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Chair: Charles Sousa





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Monday, May 4, 2026

• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Charles Sousa (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 35 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence.

Pursuant to the Standing Orders, the committee is meeting today to study the situation of francophone and indigenous members in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format.

Before we continue, I will ask participants to consult the guidelines on the table to help prevent audio and feedback incidents, and to protect the health and safety of our interpreters.

As a reminder, please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For interpretation, use your earpiece and select the appropriate channel.

As a reminder, comments should be addressed through the chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

We have Becky MacIsaac, chief warrant officer, 1 Canadian Air Division headquarters.

We also have Debbie Eisan with the First Nations Veterans Council. She is the Nova Scotia representative.

Thank you for attending.

We also have a number of new members on our committee today.

We have a few activities happening, so we will engage through our conversation and open dialogue to benefit from your insights.

We will begin with five minutes for each witness.

Ms. MacIsaac, we will start with you.

[Translation]

**Becky MacIsaac (Chief Warrant Officer, 1 Canadian Air Division Headquarters A8 Comptroller, As an Individual):** Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Thank you for inviting me today to take part in this study on the situation of francophone and indigenous members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

My name is Becky MacIsaac. I'm an anglophone. I've taken language training with the forces. I'll do my best to speak in French today. I may ask you to repeat certain questions if necessary.

I'm a Métis woman who has served for 24 years in the Canadian Armed Forces. I've also dedicated a significant part of my career to learning French. I've held various positions in administration, recruitment and financial management. I'm currently the chief warrant officer in financial services as well as the chief warrant officer of the Royal Canadian Air Force's financial services administrators occupation group.

I grew up in a military family and community in the Prairies. My father was originally from Newfoundland. My mother is a Métis woman from Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta.

Since my mother was taken away from her family at the age of three, I didn't grow up with any knowledge of my Métis culture. Only later did my mother's research enable me to reconnect with my family and my history. My Métis identity grew stronger over time. I was proud to become a citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta. This marked the beginning of my own journey of cultural reconnection.

I joined the forces in 2002, influenced by my family background. I wanted to provide stability for my daughter, achieve my career goals and serve my country. After witnessing the deployment challenges in the 1990s, I was motivated to improve the quality of life of military members and their families.

From the start of my career, I've understood the importance of French in the forces. At first, it was difficult. I didn't understand much. However, I persevered. A key moment came when a supervisor clearly told me that I needed to improve my French. I took this advice seriously by pursuing full-time training. I was then posted to Quebec for five years.

This immersion, both at work and in my personal life, was crucial. I learned to work in both languages, to adapt to the language preferences of my colleagues and to manage in a bilingual environment. Even when the going got tough, especially in training or in the field, I persevered by adapting and finding solutions, including in the career courses that I took in my second language and as an instructor for francophone administrators.

In my field, bilingualism is essential, especially for promotions. However, access to language training remains limited. I've been lucky enough to benefit from certain opportunities, such as a posting in Quebec. That isn't the case for everyone.

In general, I've had no trouble obtaining services in both languages. In Quebec, I often chose French, which gave me the opportunity to improve my skills. At work, I regularly used both languages depending on the situation.

In multinational environments abroad, the reality is different. The services are often provided in multiple languages, but English becomes the common language. I believe that what matters most in these situations is the competence and professionalism of the people speaking and the ability to properly convey key information.

In terms of retention, I've exceeded my career goals to date. As a single mother, I've been able to give my daughter a stable and rewarding life. My career has given me the opportunity to grow, learn a second language, complete a bachelor's degree in Canadian studies and serve in Canada and abroad.

As I approach 25 years of service, I'm thinking carefully about where to go from here. The values of respect and diversity, as well as safety and inclusion, remain important to me.

I'm ready to answer your questions. I'll do my best to answer them in French.

• (1105)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. MacIsaac.

I appreciate your opening remarks.

Before we begin our questions, we'll go to Ms. Eisan for her opening remarks as well.

Thank you.

**Debbie Eisan (First Nations Veterans Council, Nova Scotia Representative, Assembly of First Nations):** Thank you.

I would like to acknowledge that we are all gathered here today on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Algonquin nation.

[*Witness spoke in Anishinabe*]

[*English*]

My name is Debbie Eisan. I am a member of the Batchewana First Nation by Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

I am a 36-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces. I retired from the military in December 2011.

I started working at the friendship centre on the Monday after retirement, but in the final years of my career, I was the aboriginal adviser to the admiral for the navy, and also to the general for the army. I spent 15 years doing that job, as well as being the national aboriginal recruiting adviser.

I would like to thank the chair and members of the Standing Committee on National Defence for this opportunity to speak to you this morning.

I'm very grateful for this chance to represent the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Veterans Council. We have a written submission that is being sent to the clerk today, which covers both historical and current barriers to first nations recruitment, retention and career advancement.

First of all, on first nations witness representation, I would like to recommend that this committee consider extending this study by one meeting to hear from other first nations' voices.

First nations citizens have a long and proud history of serving in Canada's military. It is critical that you hear from more first nations veterans, youth, women and gender-diverse people to gain a better understanding of the challenges and deterrents to first nations recruitment, retention and career advancement.

Regarding first nations languages, during the Second World War, Cree code talkers developed a coded system based on their language to disguise military intelligence. The diversity of cultures and languages in Canada is a strength that should be treated with the same recognition as English and French bilingualism.

The AFN has reviewed the language program that is offered through the Canadian Armed Forces, and there are very few references beyond the use of first nations languages at commemorative events. We recommend that the Canadian Armed Forces transparently list programs in their languages of operation, including whether first nations languages are represented within training programs for first nations service members.

We also recommend that public-facing materials be translated into first nations languages to improve the reach of information to first nations communities.

Regarding first nations recruitment, first nations citizens are under-represented in the Canadian Armed Forces, with 2.9% self-identifying as indigenous, compared with 5% of the general population.

The Canadian Forces recruiting group provides minimal training in first nations community outreach and culturally relevant recruitment practices. The modernization of using online application portals to apply to the Canadian Armed Forces leaves behind first nations communities in northern and remote areas of the country. Only 39% of first nations have access to high-speed wired connectivity infrastructure, with 56% of first nations having no mobile service in their communities. Having recruiters travel to northern and remote first nations is essential if the Canadian Armed Forces is going to meet its recruitment targets.

The Canadian Forces recruiting group also needs to develop cultural competency training for their recruiters to ensure that they are being respectful and responsive to first nations needs.

Regarding first nations retention, the attrition rate of indigenous service members is 7.1%, which signals a systemic failure to foster conditions where first nations service members can build meaningful, long-term careers within the Canadian Armed Forces.

Institutional racism and discrimination are prominent in first nations' experiences with the Canadian Armed Forces, and yet first nations people still voluntarily enlist to protect this country.

The universal service requirement is structurally incompatible with family and community obligations that are central in many first nations. The Canadian Armed Forces' universality of service is a missed opportunity to embed first nations' cultural ties into daily life in a meaningful way.

Regarding first nations career advancement, the Canadian Armed Forces has been criticized for funneling first nations recruits into entry programs to satisfy the employment equity targets without supports to address the unique needs and career aspirations of new recruits.

- (1110)

Developing personalized career plans for first nations recruits at the start of their military journey to align training and career progression with their professional goals would help to address criticisms of indigenous tokenism. Offering a specialized mentorship program aimed at developing first nations leaders within the Canadian Armed Forces would both help with retention and create a clear pathway for career advancement.

In closing, since the War of 1812, first nations citizens have voluntarily joined Canadian and U.S. forces in major wars and international conflicts. Once they return home, first nations citizens face discrimination while in active service and numerous barriers to accessing critical supports.

There is a section in the submission that speaks to the critical after-duty supports that are needed for first nations veterans, which I want to bring to the committee's attention.

*Meegwetch.* Thank you very much for this opportunity to appear before you.

I look forward to your questions.

**The Chair:** *Meegwetch* to you.

Thank you for your opening statements.

We are going to our first round of questions, each six minutes long. We will start with and welcome Mr. Marc Dalton to the committee.

It's over to you, sir, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC):** Thank you very much.

Thank you to the witnesses for sharing their experiences with us.

Ms. MacIsaac, my story is similar to yours. My father was in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was from Alberta, and I too am Métis. We're probably related because my family is also from

around Lac Ste. Anne and the area north of there. It's nice to meet you.

My father spent 36 years in the armed forces. He joined during the Korean War. I'm a veteran as well. I was a reservist for a while. We always knew we were indigenous, but we didn't talk about it much. Before he died, I asked my father why he hadn't been more open about the fact that he was Métis, and he said that it wouldn't have helped him at all. That was the situation. Back then, people's attitudes towards indigenous people were much more negative.

I'm happy to see that things are changing. That's very important. I am a citizen of Métis Nation British Columbia, and I have family in Alberta. I'm also a francophone. My mother is francophone, and she encouraged me to learn French. As a teenager, I resisted, but I made the effort to learn later in life.

That brings me to my question. Have you seen significant changes? I believe you said you've been in the Canadian Armed Forces, or CAF, for 25 years.

- (1115)

**Becky MacIsaac:** Almost 25 years.

**Marc Dalton:** That can't be.

In the military world, have you seen the attitude towards indigenous, first nations, Métis or francophone people change? Has it always been the same, or has there been a change?

**Becky MacIsaac:** When I started at the leadership and recruit school in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, everyone around me was bilingual. There were English-speaking and French-speaking recruits. The first day, I was put in a room with French-speaking girls. All of my English-speaking instructors were bilingual. From day one, being in a bilingual environment was normal to me.

As for indigenous people, I saw that they were really a minority in the CAF. My first posting was in Cold Lake, and I worked with first nations people there. I did in Winnipeg, Montreal and Gander as well. Indigenous people are always in the minority on military bases. Eventually, the CAF set up the indigenous advisory group to advise the chain of command and better serve all members.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you.

[*English*]

Thank you to both of you for your service.

I'm wondering, Madam Eisan, about the Canadian Rangers program. How many are there? I don't have the numbers. What component is indigenous? Are we seeing a transition of those who are involved in the rangers in the Northwest Territories moving into the regular forces? Has that been beneficial?

**Debbie Eisan:** In the past it wasn't beneficial. I was one of the advisers for the indigenous programs when I was in uniform, for the Black Bear program, the Raven, the ALOY program, which is ILOY now. At the time, we brought rangers into the programs.

There was one particular instance. There was a sergeant who spent many years with the rangers. He wanted to join the regular force, but they wouldn't give him any time served as a ranger. He opted to stay with the rangers and rightly so. Over the years, they are starting to allow time served in the rangers as time served if you join the regular force. This is an advancement forward. With the new push for the north, especially with the navy and the situation where things are now, the rangers are becoming a very integral part of success and survival in the north. They are a very huge part of the Canadian Armed Forces now in the work that they do.

• (1120)

**Marc Dalton:** That's good to hear. I mean it wasn't good that it wasn't recognized, but that there's a change that the reservists' time is counting, and it certainly should be applying to this also.

I see we have come to the end, but I'll just put a question out there. The last time, the committee heard that indigenous enrolment was far below target and that officials have clear statistics on indigenous representation at the general and flag officers senior leadership level.

From your perspective, what should DND and CAF be focusing on? You may want to weave that into one of your responses. If you have a quick response, go ahead.

[Translation]

**Becky MacIsaac:** I think indigenous veterans can make the biggest difference for the community. They're good role models for young people who are thinking about joining the forces.

[English]

**Debbie Eisan:** For me, it's when we do get indigenous members into the Canadian Armed Forces. For example, if we have a young fellow coming from Siksika First Nation out west and he wants to join the navy and they send him to Halifax, he brings his family with him. What they need to do is consider the families that are coming with them. They're working very hard to make sure that culture and spirituality is observed within the Canadian Armed Forces, but they're unintentionally leaving the families behind. Retention is a huge part, and they need to start including families, especially with the military family resource centres, including programs and mentorship within those organizations.

*Meegwetch.*

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Watchorn, it's over to you for six minutes.

[Translation]

**Tim Watchorn (Les Pays-d'en-Haut, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. MacIsaac, thank you for your proficiency in French. Your French is outstanding. You have no issues there.

Mr. Dalton also speaks fantastic French. I want to thank him as well. Well done.

**Marc Dalton:** Thank you.

**Tim Watchorn:** We're nearing the end of our study, and I'd like to give each of you some time to share your recommendations with the committee.

Ms. MacIsaac, how can the CAF do a better job of integrating francophones?

Ms. Eisan, how can the CAF do a better job of integrating indigenous people?

Ms. MacIsaac, you can go first.

**Becky MacIsaac:** As far as integrating francophones into the CAF is concerned, I think moving to Quebec was very helpful, as was working with others as a team, speaking the language and having various opportunities. I work with francophones all over the country, and it's the same. Francophone members are all over the country, from Winnipeg and Alberta to Newfoundland and Labrador. I would say that they're already integrated in the CAF, and that we just have to make a bigger effort to speak French more often. It's true that, in the air force, English tends to be the day-to-day operating language, and that is why it's important to find solutions so that people can speak French.

[English]

**Tim Watchorn:** Mrs. Eisan, I'll ask you the same thing.

**Debbie Eisan:** Yes, for me, if you were recruiting indigenous people from across this country, wherever they're posted to, it's important for that base commander or admiral in charge to learn the language of the territory they're in.

I'm not saying that you have to be fluent in Mi'kmaq, Algonquin or Cree, but at least learn the language to welcome that person to the territory. Welcome them just so you know that you're open to more language learning.

[Translation]

I understand French and I speak a bit, but not much.

[English]

I also understand the importance of our languages and who we are as indigenous people. Those are our roots. All of our teachings, all of our ceremonies and all of our history are rooted in our language. We can't switch our ceremonies to English, because it just doesn't work the same way.

Understanding the importance of knowing, when an indigenous person comes in, how to say "hello", "thank you" or "see you later" in the language of the territory you're in goes a long way to showing that we're moving forward in accepting indigenous people.

• (1125)

**Tim Watchorn:** That's interesting. Those are great answers.

[Translation]

Ms. MacIsaac, in terms of operations, the CAF has two fighter wings, one in Bagotville and one in Cold Lake. Have you seen barriers to integration in those two units? I assume one is predominately French-speaking and the other is predominantly English-speaking.

**Becky MacIsaac:** I worked at the fighter wing in Cold Lake. Now I'm at division headquarters, in Winnipeg. We oversee the wings.

I think bilingualism is present in both wings, but obviously, Cold Lake is more English-speaking and Bagotville is more French-speaking. I think the fact that francophones at the Cold Lake wing are immersed in English and, similarly, that anglophones at the Bagotville wing are immersed in French really helps the members of the air force build the skills to work in both languages. It's a bit like that now, but day-to-day activities are still conducted in English in the Royal Canadian Air Force.

**Tim Watchorn:** Thank you.

You said you didn't have any trouble accessing services in both languages. Did you have trouble getting training in both languages? Is there a lack of training?

**Becky MacIsaac:** Yes. Currently, the schools don't have enough instructors, so we're always having to ask units to provide master corporals, sergeants, warrant officers and so forth, to help with short-term teaching needs. Sometimes courses are cancelled if instructors can't be found. It's happened a few times in the past year, for both French and English courses.

With current recruitment and course availability, the situation is shaky when it comes to the ranks of chief warrant officer, sergeant and warrant officer. That is the situation we're seeing.

**Tim Watchorn:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Watchorn and Ms. MacIsaac.

We now go to Mr. Savard-Tremblay for six minutes.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot—Acton, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here and sharing their insight.

I want to join my colleague in complimenting you on your French skills. Thank you for making that effort.

Ms. Eisan, I believe you said "*meegwetch*" at the end of your opening remarks. In Wendat, we say "*tiawenhk*". That's how we say thank you.

I'm a member of the Wendat nation. Unfortunately, Wendat is mostly a dead language. We've seen efforts to revive it in the past few years, with some language classes being offered, but Wendat has disappeared from everyday use. I myself took classes eight years ago, but it's very hard to keep up your skills in a language that people don't commonly use. Still, we hope that efforts to revive and

revitalize Wendat will continue and that it becomes popular again among the people of Wendake.

My first question is for you, Ms. Eisan.

We know that the CAF was aiming to increase indigenous representation to 3.5% by March 31, 2026. That deadline has passed. According to the numbers we have, 2.9% of regular force and primary reserve force members self-identified as indigenous in 2024-25, whereas indigenous people make up 5% of the population. That means indigenous people are under-represented in the armed forces relative to their numbers in the general population.

Indigenous recruits accounted for 4% of recruits in 2022-23, and 5% in 2023-24 and 2024-25.

With indigenous recruitment at 5%, why is overall indigenous representation still hovering around 3%? Is there a problem with recruitment? Is there a problem with retention? Is it due to a lack of trust in the institution?

[English]

**Debbie Eisan:** I think it's all three of those. The recruitment problem is, when you go into communities.... If we go back to the history of indigenous folks here on Turtle Island, in Canada, there's a problem of trust. It's a huge thing when a non-indigenous person goes into a community and tries to recruit. If it's not an indigenous person going into the community to recruit, there's an automatic overlay of mistrust of the information that's being put forward. Even as an indigenous person, when I go into first nations communities, they accept and know that I'm indigenous, but it takes a while to gain the trust of the community and the people.

Trust is one thing for recruiting. Another is being able to look at the information and to see what is offered in the language of the people who are joining, whether they are first nations, Métis or Inuit.

Another thing is retention. As I stated before, if you put somebody in an area that's not close to their community, they're going to be homesick. They're going to be missing.... You have to include their families so that there are things there for their families to do.

For example, when a sailor sails for six months at a time, his family is left behind. If he's a Cree person in Mi'kmaq territory, there's a disconnect unless he knows where to go. It's really important to have programs in place for families to go to when they need help.

Another one is language. Language is a barrier that will not help with retention.

With the three of those, I know it sounds like a huge problem, but a little bit at a time we start understanding the nuances behind recruiting. You would not send a non-Indigenous person into a remote community to ask that community to send their young people to be with us and join the Canadian Armed Forces.

The history is there from our treaties. People would sign up to honour our side of the treaties to protect Turtle Island, but the intergenerational trauma that exists with the federal government is there, and that's a barrier to overcome.

If you do, then you're looking at a language barrier and a retention problem, not only if they're not with their families, but also if they're single. You're taking them away from their communities. That's another huge aspect of it as well.

You start chopping away at those barriers a little bit at a time, maybe by putting indigenous knowledge keepers into each one of the bases. They could be there in an advisory capacity to the base commanders, the MARLANT or the wing commanders, to advise them on issues that may arise with indigenous service people. Those are small things that can move forward. It doesn't have to be elders. It can be knowledge keepers or veterans.

At the Assembly of First Nations Veterans Council, we have representatives across the country. We come together, and we do great work. We are very strong supporters of recruiting for the Canadian Armed Forces. At the same time, they have to reach out to us to get our help because we can't just go in and say, "Here we are. We're going to take over."

*Meegwetch.*

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** You talked a little about institutionalized racism in the armed forces. Would you say it's institutional, or is it simply a matter of prejudice being spread from individual to individual?

I'm going to digress for a moment to talk about another type of workplace. I represent a very agricultural riding. Foreign workers are always in demand. I understand there's a problem that needs fixing when it comes to foreign workers, but why not hire indigenous workers? Working with farmers would bring indigenous people out of the isolation of their communities. They would have positive experiences and be part of the workforce. That is where I still see some prejudice towards indigenous people in terms of employment. It's not necessarily towards indigenous people as individuals; it's more towards indigenous people in the workplace.

Is that the case in the armed forces as well? Have you heard things like that?

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** Yes. One of my favourite persons is former senator Murray Sinclair, who is now in the spirit world. He said, "Education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out."

I firmly believe there is racism and discrimination because people don't understand our culture and don't understand who we are. From the time I first joined in 1975, I experienced racism and discrimination until the point when I reached the rank of sergeant, when I said "no more". I took it upon myself, as my mission, to start educating the Canadian Armed Forces about our culture—what our smudges are, what our spirituality is, who we are as an indigenous people why residential schools have a strong impact in our communities, and intergenerational trauma. The people you're

recruiting are individuals who are suffering 98% of the intergenerational trauma from their parents being in residential schools. That racism and discrimination comes with them.

We have to educate. That's something very important that TRC brought forth. The blanket exercise tells about the history of indigenous people. That's the truth part. The reconciliation is what we do from this day forward. Each one of us reconciles in a different way. In terms of helping to educate, that door goes both ways. It's not us sitting here saying that you need to learn about our culture. It's also us saying that we are here to help educate, to share our culture with you, and to share, as best we can, our ceremonies, which are different across the county.

I think that's the way to move forward. We're not there yet. I'm happy to say that we're moving, but we're not there yet. We have a long way to go.

*Meegwetch.*

• (1135)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Eisan.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

[*English*]

I would like to welcome Mr. Billy Morin to continue with our second round.

You have up to five minutes, sir.

**Billy Morin (Edmonton Northwest, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both for coming today, and thank you for your service.

Ms. Eisan, you answered about five of my questions.

In the last one, you were talking about culture in the military service. There's a chaplain position in the military. There are religious support services. I'm wondering if you could highlight a tangible example from your service of where sweat lodges mattered, or where any of the cultural ceremonies mattered, when it came to recruitment and retention.

**Debbie Eisan:** Absolutely. I'll give you a personal example.

In my service, I was posted in Montreal, in Anjou. I ended up being six months in Rwanda. When NATO closed out Rwanda—this is a bad example for me to use, but I'm going to use it anyway—I came back not the same person. I went through the military, through social workers, to try to help me through. It was helping, but it wasn't getting me there. I requested time off and I went on leave. I went to my elders. I went to a sweat lodge. I went to ceremonies. I spoke to elders to help me get through the things I experienced and the things I did.

The sweat lodge helped me clear any negative energy I had in my system and helped me to move forward. Honestly, I can say to you today that, otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting here today—I still tear up when I think of those children and I think of the things that happened over there—in the way that I am, advocating for indigenous people and advocating for our spirituality, our culture and our ways of life with our sweat lodges, our ceremonies and the things we need in order to move forward.

We have been working with Veterans Affairs to offer sweat lodge ceremonies and to have elders try to help individuals who are still in uniform through situations with post-traumatic stress syndrome and help them move forward. You can't treat everybody the same way. It doesn't matter if our skin is all the same colour; we all have a different way that we have to be looked at in order to move forward in a very positive way.

That's my example of why those ceremonies are so important.

*Meegwetch.*

**Billy Morin:** Thank you for sharing that, for your vulnerability and for your advocacy.

I'm going to take it to what some people might view as an extreme or tough question.

You have 24 years of experience, Ms. MacIsaac, and, Ms. Eisan, you have 36 years.

I'm just going to jump into it. I'm googling what Finland does with mandatory service for males and the general population.

Given that you have a long history in the military and come from a military family, do you see a conversation to be opened up in Canada about mandatory military service and the benefits or the detractions of that?

[*Translation*]

**Becky MacIsaac:** When I was deployed to Kosovo, the Swiss army was there, and in Switzerland, military service is mandatory for men. They told me how the system works, and as a strategic policy, it's quite impressive. As a result, though, women make up just 1% of the Swiss army. Women explained the situation to me, telling me that they all serve on a voluntary basis.

I think it's a good experience for everyone. People learn discipline, teamwork and what it is to serve their country. It's a good idea, but I think we need to do some more research and look not just at countries like Switzerland.

• (1140)

[*English*]

**Billy Morin:** Thank you.

The only thing I'd note is that Finland is the happiest country in the world. It seems to work over there, too.

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

We're happy in Canada as well. We need to do better, and that's why we're having these conversations.

Ms. Idlout, I turn the floor over to you for five minutes.

**Lori Idlout (Nunavut, Lib.):** *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.* Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Debbie and Becky, for your service and your courage to share your experiences with us. You're both so important individually and for the study as well, and I really appreciate you both.

Debbie, I really appreciate how much you want the focus on indigenous languages to be more prominent and how much you want to serve indigenous people with their languages. I hope that this committee takes your recommendation to extend the study by a day. Maybe you can submit some names of those who could be called as witnesses.

If we do extend it, I know, for example, that I would ask the commissioner of indigenous languages to appear as a witness. In 2019, the federal government enacted the Indigenous Languages Act, which requires the federal government to do what it can to ensure that first nations, Métis and Inuit are being served in their languages. It would be great to hear from them how that legislation can help improve the Canadian Armed Forces in terms of recruitment and retention, as well as in terms of making sure that programs and services that are reflective of our cultures continue on. That's so important. I hear that in your voice, Debbie, so I do appreciate that very much.

I've learned, for example, that National Defence will commit \$1.5 million annually through the indigenous reconciliation program to increase defence and collaboration. I wonder if you could share with us if you think that is enough from National Defence to make sure that there's reconciliation.

**Debbie Eisan:** I see it in layman's terms, so I understand the importance of the dollar values of things. From my perspective, I think it should be an ongoing thing, regardless—and this is probably not going to go well in this room—of the dollar value. When you do reconciliation training and truth training, you do that for the individual group of people there, but things evolve and people move on. If you don't have the things in place to do the training for those who come next, then it's going to get lost and we're going to go right back to where we started.

I really think it's important that people—not just Canadian Armed Forces but all Canadians—understand the history of indigenous people, how we got to the point we're at today and why we are fighting so hard for our culture, for our spirituality and for our recognition. That is the only way we're going to move forward so that people understand the history.

I do a lot of this training and I get the good, the bad, the ugly and the “oh my God” from people who get it and from people who don't want to get it. For me, it's important for it to move on. If you tell one, they'll tell more.

Within the Canadian Armed Forces and within all of Canada, people need to understand that. For an indigenous person to sign up to fight for Turtle Island, for Canada, is a huge step.

A lot do it because their grandparents did it or their great-grandparents did it. In my family, I'm the only one who has signed up to do this. I think it's important and I feel that it's my responsibility for the people coming after me to start sharing this knowledge, this culture and my experiences to make it easier for those young people coming in. As an elder, as a veteran and as a grandmother, it is my responsibility to do this, and I take it very seriously. That's what we have to do. I understand budgets and money, but we need to keep moving forward regardless.

*Meegwetch.*

● (1145)

**Lori Idlout:** Thank you. That's a great response. This is the venue to do it, because we'll be writing our report and we'll be making recommendations that go to National Defence. You shared that perfectly for us.

I have a specific question for you as well, because of your history.

The Canadian Coast Guard is transitioning to the National Defence department. It's seen as an enhancement for opening relationships with the coastal communities in Canada. I wonder if you have any specific recommendations for making sure that it is a smooth transition for the Canadian Coast Guard to go into National Defence and so that collaboration with coastal communities can be strong.

**Debbie Eisan:** I had the honour and opportunity, as an elder, to be part of the ceremony to bring the Coast Guard under the navy. I worked with the Coast Guard a lot out of Halifax before they moved under the navy. I've shared the blanket exercise. I've shared culture with them. I've introduced them to the Atelihai program at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, so that they have access to the culture and the elders from the Inuit community. I have introduced them, virtually, to the Inuit elders and seniors who I have met in my travels in uniform.

They are really working hard to make that transition easy for them by having sister communities so that they understand ceremonies and the culture. They're learning a little bit of the language of Inuktitut for when they travel to the communities, but they're also understanding that there are 51 different dialects of Inuktitut, so it's not the same in Nunavut as it is in the Northwest Territories. I

think they're on the right track. They're working very hard to make sure they do it right the first time by moving slowly.

*Meegwetch.*

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Eisan. Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

[*Translation*]

It's now over to Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Thank you.

Ms. MacIsaac, do Métis peoples fall under the same programs? The Canadian Armed Forces have different recruitment programs for indigenous people. Are Métis peoples covered by the same programs?

**Becky MacIsaac:** Yes, first nations members, Métis peoples and Inuit are all covered by the CAF's indigenous programs.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** There are a lot of programs. It's a long list: the Canadian Armed Forces indigenous entry program, the indigenous leadership opportunity year, Black Bear, Bold Eagle, Carcajou, Grey Wolf and Raven.

It's a sizable list. You'd automatically think that, with so many programs, at least one has to be working. Are they effective? Why is it still hard to recruit people?

**Becky MacIsaac:** I think social media are a good way for the Canadian Armed Forces to get their message out to all the communities. You also need good leaders, solid role models, mentorship and good recruiters to communicate with all the communities concerned.

It's just about creating a climate, an environment, where all members of the country's military are respected, including in the media. Oftentimes, the media publish negative stories and don't cover the stories we're proud of.

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Do you think a bad image is to blame?

**Becky MacIsaac:** That's exactly it. There are all kinds of stories that showcase courage, search and rescue operations, war contributions and military families. Those stories need to be covered, to teach people about the positive aspects of the military community, its operations and its work overall.

● (1150)

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** Is that your opinion as well, Ms. Eisan?

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** Yes. I had the great opportunity throughout my career to be an adviser to Bold Eagle, but I also stood up Black Bear, Raven and the indigenous leadership opportunity year as the adviser.

The important part of those programs was, yes, to recruit, but it was also to understand that we're bringing indigenous men and women into an organization that they know nothing about. It was important to have, number one, a culture camp at the beginning to bring them together to start working as a team, but to also have indigenous counsellors and elders as part of those programs to help with homesickness, to help with adjusting, to help with meals—especially for Inuit coming from the north, down to the south, the food is different—and to understand how that works.

These programs are important for those individuals who want to just try out the military. There's no obligation to join, notwithstanding the fact that, if they absolutely knew they wanted to join and knew about the military, they don't have to go through these programs. However, the important part is to have the cultural representation there to help them through issues.

**The Chair:** *Meegwetch*, Ms. Eisan.

Mr. Jacques Gourde, welcome to the committee. It's over to you.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde (Lévis—Lotbinière, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the two witnesses for being here.

My first question is for Ms. Eisan.

Does the goal of defending Canada's north take into account the expertise, know-how and knowledge of the land that indigenous armed forces members have?

Can they make a difference?

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** There are two parts.

Number one is having the indigenous member identify as being indigenous. A lot of the time it's important to understand that they won't identify for various reasons, unless they visually look indigenous, like I do, but some don't.

If they identify as indigenous, especially for up north, you won't have a first nations member from Batchewana, like me, identifying that, "Oh, I'm an expert in the north." I couldn't do that. Those individuals who are Inuit from up north, they are looking for specifics to help integrate into the north. For those—especially in my position, where I may not know about survival in the north—I can say, "I know where I can connect you to people who know about survival in the north." It's about sharing that knowledge.

As first nations and indigenous people, we don't assume that we know everything. We know that we can point you in the right direction where you can find out the information that you need.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde:** Thank you very much.

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Jacques Gourde:** My next question is for Ms. MacIsaac.

In your presentation, you underscored the importance of French in the Canadian Armed Forces. Can you talk more about that? What did you mean by that?

**Becky MacIsaac:** I'd like to thank the member for his question, Mr. Chair.

Obviously, as members of a team, we have to be able to communicate with one another. It's crucial to communicate with all members of the team, including subordinates, and to lead by example. I've met other students, instructors and leaders who can speak both languages. What's more, instructions are normally given in both languages. Government emails, for instance, are also sent in both languages. We are clearly in a bilingual environment, a bilingual country.

When training begins, it is simply important to encourage everyone to learn their second language, to start teaching them that language and to give them opportunities to use it.

There aren't enough opportunities for everyone to take the training. Only certain people have the opportunity to become bilingual. That's a problem. If we want everyone to be able to communicate in both languages, they have to have access to classes and immersion opportunities in Quebec or other bilingual communities, so they can keep up their fluency in both languages.

• (1155)

**Jacques Gourde:** On an international exchange with France, for example, do francophone CAF members work with their French counterparts in French, or do they speak English?

**Becky MacIsaac:** When I was in Kosovo, about 30 other countries had a presence there, with members from France and Switzerland, but also Germans who could speak French. The operational language day to day was English, but a lot of languages were routinely spoken at camp. I think it's always useful to speak French both at home and abroad.

**Jacques Gourde:** Thank you.

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

[*English*]

Ms. Lapointe, it's over to you for five minutes.

**Viviane Lapointe (Sudbury, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Eisan, my northern Ontario colleague, the member of Parliament for Sault Ste. Marie, speaks highly about the work the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre does in communities. I want to thank you for the work you do for them.

From your work with indigenous veterans, do you think there are some additional challenges that we should be aware of? Are there policies or programs that we could put in place to help the armed forces better support indigenous members while they are serving?

**Debbie Eisan:** Yes, I think we could. It has to be a carry-over. While they're serving, it's important for the Canadian Armed Forces to let indigenous members know that there are other options for them out there.

For example, I know that the bases now have areas where you can smudge. In Halifax, I've outfitted all ships with smudge kits. Individuals can go to the coxswain's office, for example, if they need to have a smudge. Smudge is a ceremony that we do for cleansing. It's important for that to be available for indigenous members to be able to do that.

The other thing is to support the sweat lodges that are now opening up across the country. In Halifax, before I got out, we managed to get a sweat lodge set up at the Shearwater base. The sweat lodges are working great for the indigenous people there.

The other aspect that I mentioned in my briefing is about cultural awareness. If we don't start sharing cultural awareness, then it's that young person in the army, in the navy.... Racism and discrimination are not accepted in the Canadian Armed Forces, but it's still alive and well. What happens is that it's not accepted and it goes underground. It goes down to the decks and into the messes. You can't fight an enemy that you can't see.

This is important for us to understand. That cultural awareness goes a long way to making sure that the young indigenous person, whether they join the army, navy or air force, knows that cultural awareness is there and they have avenues if something happens. When they come out of the military, it's important for Veterans Affairs and the Assembly of First Nations—the First Nations Veterans Council is working now with Veterans Affairs—to try to alleviate those barriers for indigenous veterans when they retire.

Thank you.

• (1200)

**Viviane Lapointe:** During this study, we've heard that the recruitment system is currently in profound transformation. We've had some witnesses come forward and tell us about that. What changes are you seeing that are already improving the consistency and the building of trust for recruits?

**Debbie Eisan:** Personally, I'm not seeing a whole lot of changes. I'm seeing a lot of things going backwards. They're not having indigenous recruiters go into communities. That needs to happen. They need to see someone who can be in their shoes, "If you can do that, I can do that."

They need more paper application options. They're applying on-line, but not every community has Internet access. They might not have mobile phones. It takes three hours through a dead area with no phone lines to get to my brother's community. They have to work harder at that to make it more visible.

On the bases, the wings, they need to have that knowledge-keeper guidance. I do that in Halifax in my role as honorary naval captain, but other places don't have that. Base commanders, wing commanders and admirals need someone they can go to when they're looking for advice on something, on an issue that has come up, when they're not sure if it's cultural or when they're not sure how to

move forward with it. Knowledge-keepers would be able to help them with that.

Each base can have that, especially in the territories. It varies from Nova Scotia to B.C., and it varies from first nations to Métis to Inuit. The cultures and the spirituality are different, and they need to understand that.

**Viviane Lapointe:** Thank you for that testimony. It's important for us to hear where we're not doing well. That leads to really good recommendations in the study.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lapointe, your time is up.

**Viviane Lapointe:** I didn't get to question Madam MacIsaac.

**The Chair:** I'm so sorry.

Ms. Gallant, it's over to you for five minutes.

**Cheryl Gallant (Algonquin—Renfrew—Pembroke, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We heard about existing CAF initiatives to attract indigenous recruits to its ranks. You mentioned the ILOY program offered only at RMC, and the summer training program, which happens on bases throughout the country. However, there doesn't seem to be any initiative to bring these experiences—cadet corps and squadrons, The Navy League or Junior Canadian Rangers—on reserve so that they don't have to leave their communities.

Should the CAF focus on outreach on reserves, specifically?

**Debbie Eisan:** The outreach should be on reserves to recruit for those bases. This happened to us. When we talk to the kids, the army cadets, about recruiting, it's a very fine line that you could cross. It looks as though you're going after the children to join the Canadian Armed Forces.

The experience in the army cadets, navy cadets and air cadets is good for discipline. They're good programs for the kids to do the things that they have to do to move forward, like time management and things like that. When it came to recruiting for the Canadian Armed Forces, we stayed away from where the children were. In my time, we did not want to be seen as recruiting children for the Canadian Armed Forces.

**Cheryl Gallant:** Is that why there is no outreach to the young people and no cadet corps on site?

**Debbie Eisan:** That's right. There is a group that looks after putting together army cadets, and they try to get them in the communities. However, for Canadian Armed Forces recruiting, we don't go to the cadets.

**Cheryl Gallant:** It's tough for the kids to get to the different communities that have cadet corps, so they're still isolated.

**Debbie Eisan:** Exactly.

**Cheryl Gallant:** We heard from witnesses who worked at RMC. They said that a low number of graduates from the ILOY program go on to pursue a career in the CAF.

From your perspective and from the feedback you've heard, what's not drawing them back after completion of the program?

• (1205)

**Debbie Eisan:** I think a lot has to do with the cultural aspect of it as well, with their language, with the availability of ceremonies and so on and so forth, but also attachment to their communities. In our communities, when someone decides to go to a school to become a doctor or a lawyer, they'll go back to their communities and give back to their communities.

In the ILOY program, it's a year to bring up your marks to see if being an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces is something that you want to continue with, but also it's very strict and very strenuous. Right off the bat, they're put into a situation where they're following rules and regulations and so on and so forth, plus having to maintain their marks and move up. When that program was first developed, it was to see if we could try to get the kids to get their marks up, because the ILOY program helps them to bring their marks up so that they can succeed in RMC. It's a fine line, and now with the TRC happening and the education on truth and reconciliation and residential schools, people are starting to realize that they want to be more in their communities helping their communities.

**Cheryl Gallant:** Should the ILOY program be only hosted at RMC or should it be expanded to RMC Saint-Jean in Quebec?

**Debbie Eisan:** In my opinion it needs to stay at the Royal Military College because the ILOY program is a year at the college, and they get used to being at the Royal Military College. They have two elders there whom I know very well. They work very well with that group. If they're going to continue on for the four years that they're going to be at the Royal Military College, it's easier and better for it to stay at RMC rather than take them from Saint-Jean and say, "Okay, you're done here and now we're going to send you to Kingston." It's a whole different there and they have to get used to a new city, a new way, new programs, new discipline. It needs to stay at RMC, in my opinion.

**Cheryl Gallant:** We heard from witnesses previously that indigenous ranks in the CAF are overwhelmingly part of the army compared to the RCAF or the navy.

How do we invigorate indigenous recruits into the navy?

**Debbie Eisan:** I've been trying to do that for 36 years.

In the history of our people, they've always joined the army, the infantry. They're snipers. They're trackers. They joined to do what they're good at doing. The navy is on the west coast and the east coast. If you're used to being in.... If you're a Newfoundlander, you're going to join the navy because you're used to that way of life. That's why there are very few indigenous people in Nova Scotia who have joined the navy. It's always army for everybody.

I think we have to start showing ourselves more what the navy is about and what we can do. I know this is something Admiral Top-shee has done with the year-long program, and it's starting to be very successful.

**The Chair:** *Meegwetch.*

**Debbie Eisan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** I'm sensitive to time. I have Mr. Earle up next, then Mr. Savard-Tremblay, then Mr. Kibble, but I only have six minutes, so we'll try to be expedient.

Mr. Earle.

**Philip Earle (Labrador, Lib.):** Thank you for your testimony. I've appreciated your being here and bringing it forward. I have two nephews in the navy in Halifax, so I'm going to speak to you afterwards. Both are indigenous.

I'm thinking about the CAF and how postings are done. I have been listening to your testimony this morning and considering the importance of that indigenous integration into the community. I don't come from a military background myself, but I described the connection I have. How important is it that when postings are done, if it is an indigenous person who is serving, they may be posted to a base that's in an indigenous homeland, such as Labrador at 5 Wing Goose Bay, in my case?

Would both of you like to comment on that?

[*Translation*]

**Becky MacIsaac:** I think that's extremely important for retention. As managers, we have to support the requests and wishes of indigenous people as much as possible. We have to support them, so they can be closer to their families and indigenous, Métis or Inuit communities. We just have to find solutions and really stand up for them.

• (1210)

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** I agree with everything she just said. Retention is everything. If you're in your home community or close to your home community and you need that support or those ceremonies, they're right there for you. I agree with everything she just said.

**Philip Earle:** Thank you for that.

Becky, you had a close connection with the Canadian Rangers from your posting in Gander. Knowing the Canadian Rangers as I do from my riding, the great work they do in imparting traditional knowledge, whether it's on a trail, a mountain, a lake, snow conditions, winter conditions, spring conditions and so on....

Is there a way, in your opinion, that we could bring more of the indigenous and cultural knowledge that can be imparted from the Canadian Rangers—primarily the Inuit—to the regular force so that cultural sensitivity is understood and better practices for the overall Canadian Armed Forces are brought forward from it?

[*Translation*]

**Becky MacIsaac:** Absolutely.

Search and rescue operations or air operations come to mind. Indigenous people and Inuit teach CAF members, including the Canadian Rangers and other units, how to survive in austere environments and how to respect first nations traditions.

For example, pilots can take a course on the Cold Lake weapons range taught by first nations instructors in Cold Lake. The range was part of the traditional territory of the Dene people. The course teaches pilots respect for the area and its history. They also spend a day on the land. They participate in ceremonies, learn how to fish in the lake and take part in other such practices.

Cultural exchanges are really important, so that members learn respect for the land and the survival skills needed in certain areas.

**Philip Earle:** Thank you.

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

[*English*]

I'm looking at the time. Mr. Savard-Tremblay and Mr. Kibble, we'll try to get in one question each.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

**Simon-Pierre Savard-Tremblay:** I'll be very quick.

We are talking a lot about the programs, and what's working and what isn't. My question is about what happens before that.

Does the Canadian Armed Forces consult the Assembly of First Nations beforehand?

[*English*]

**Debbie Eisan:** I do not believe they were consulted primarily. Now, with the standing up of the AFN Veterans Council, there is a representative from every province and territory. They are being consulted for advice and guidance on different things. There are elders to go to or knowledge-keepers to use in the different programs.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Savard-Tremblay.

[*English*]

We'll go to Mr. Kibble for the last one.

**Jeff Kibble (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for your service. As we say on the west coast, *hych'ka*.

Ms. Eisan, it was good to see you at the Battle of the Atlantic dinner on Thursday in Halifax. I know you're highly respected by navy leadership there.

We see that 20% of recruits are permanent residents—some are in Canada for as little as three months—and there's no language screening now to recruit in English or French. Based on your experience—this is for either of you—will this dilute both important indigenous representation and important French language levels in the Canadian Forces?

• (1215)

[*Translation*]

**Becky MacIsaac:** It's important to balance French and English and to ensure that recruits are able to communicate in one of the two official languages. In my career, I've come across a situation where an individual couldn't speak English very well and could not speak French at all. That person had a lot of trouble on deployment and was sent back to Canada because of it. They couldn't function in the operating environment.

[*English*]

**Jeff Kibble:** Very quickly, maybe you could provide an indigenous perspective on that high number of permanent residents.

**Debbie Eisan:** From my perspective, like I said, English is paramount. I've taken French training, but I think it's more important to the person who moves across the country for the leadership to understand, as I was saying, the difference in saying “hello” and greeting someone in their language. That's what I try to learn as I move across the country. I don't speak it fluently. I try to at least acknowledge the territory and the language with the language of the place I'm in by saying “hello”, “thank you for having me” and those kinds of things.

*Meegwetch.*

**The Chair:** *Meegwetch*, Ms. Eisan.

**Debbie Eisan:** *Meegwetch.*

**The Chair:** To both witnesses, I appreciate your time before us here today.

Before we conclude, folks, all members received suggested schedules for the informal meetings. We've had that discussion and there were no objections received, so we're going to proceed to organizing these meetings.

I'll put it to you:

- a) The committee meet, in informal meetings, with
  - i) A delegation from the Estonia-Canada Parliamentary Friendship Group, jointly with the Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee, on Tuesday, May 26, 2026;
  - ii) A delegation from the European Parliament Security and Defense Committee on Tuesday, May 26, 2026;
  - iii) The German Federal Minister of Defence on Wednesday, May 27, 2026;
  - iv) A delegation from Luxembourg on June 2, 2026;

b) the committee defray the hospitality expenses, or half the hospitality expenses for a joint meeting.

We're talking about coffee and a flag.

That's item one.

Is it agreed?

I see no opposition—

**Cheryl Gallant:** I want to know what time it will be on Wednesday.

**The Chair:** I'm going to let the clerk give us some feedback on when.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Jean-Denis Kusion):** I know Wednesday is a packed day. My suggestion was from 1p.m. to 2 p.m., which is after the caucus meetings but before QP.

**The Chair:** Regarding the NORAD modernization study, the Northwest Territories trips will happen from Monday, July 13, to Friday, July 17. We should have the names of the members who will travel provided to the clerk by the end of the week. Folks, please provide those names. As you know, it allows for six MPs: three Liberals, two Conservatives and one Bloc member. That was the agreement. I think we talked about possibly doing some MOB, and we'll discuss that with the clerk as we proceed.

With the committee's agreement, shall we adjourn the meeting?

The meeting is adjourned.

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