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• (1630)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.)): I now call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 20 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Before continuing, I just want to make sure that you have all received the correspondence that was sent in both official languages by Minister McKnight.

I see you nodding. Great.

Pursuant to the motion adopted on September 18, 2025, the committee is meeting on its study of barriers to entrepreneurship among veterans.

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

[*English*]

Before we continue, I would ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. You will also notice a QR code on the card that links to a short awareness video.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of our witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation, floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. I don't think any members are participating today using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for this first hour.

From Dog House Brewing Company Limited, we have Mr. Richard McNish, co-owner, who's here in person.

We have, by video conference, from Green Army Coffee, Mr. Jody Mitic, founder.

It's really a pleasure to welcome both of you. Thank you for joining us today.

Each of you will have five minutes to give your opening remarks, and I say five minutes, please. We will then proceed to a series of questions with the members of the committee. Just to be very candid, sometimes our members like to extend their time, and I have to interrupt. I'm also the clock keeper. I apologize in advance if I interrupt you. Members know their allocated time.

Mr. McNish, the floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Richard McNish (Co-Owner, Dog House Brewing Company Ltd.): Madam Chair and honourable members of the committee, I thank you for this opportunity to appear before you as part of the study.

My name is Richard McNish. I appear before you as a veteran with nearly 32 years of distinguished service in the Canadian Armed Forces. Over that time, I served in multiple trades and leadership roles, including operational deployments and command-level responsibilities, and I was entrusted with the management of significant public resources and large publicly funded budgets.

I raise that not to provide a résumé but to establish context. Veterans are trained in financial stewardship, accountability and disciplined risk management. Those skills are not theoretical; they are applied under scrutiny, with real consequences, over long careers.

I now speak from lived experience in transitioning in the Ottawa Valley, including in my town of Petawawa, one of Canada's most military-connected communities. In regions like ours, the effectiveness of Veterans Affairs Canada policy is not abstract: It directly affects veterans, families and local economies.

For many veterans, entrepreneurship is not an alternative to transition—it is the transition.

Veterans bring leadership, planning discipline, regulatory compliance experience and risk controls developed through service. These competencies align directly with business ownership. However, VAC's current framework remains primarily oriented towards traditional wage-based employment. As a result, veterans pursuing entrepreneurship often encounter systemic barriers rather than structured support.

First, through employment-centric program design, VAC continues to define successful transition largely through employment outcomes. Entrepreneurship is often treated as higher risk or less suitable, rather than as a legitimate and frequently therapeutic pathway. Veterans proposing self-employment are often required to justify their choice in ways not expected of those pursuing conventional employment. This approach does not reflect the diversity of post-service careers, nor does it fully leverage the skills veterans bring with them.

A second barrier is funding and benefit misalignment.

Entrepreneurship requires upfront investment and timely decision-making. VAC funding models, generally reimbursement-based and procedurally slow, are misaligned with start-up realities, such as leasing property, purchasing equipment and meeting regulatory requirements.

Veterans also face uncertainty around how early-stage business income interacts with income replacement benefits. The lack of clear, consistent guidance creates risk aversion and discourages veterans from pursuing otherwise viable enterprises.

A third barrier is inconsistent decision-making capacity.

VAC case managers do essential work under significant pressures. However, evaluating entrepreneurship requires specific expertise that is not uniformly available. Veterans consistently report different outcomes, depending on individual familiarity with business concepts, creating uncertainty, delays and loss of confidence in the system.

From lived experience in Petawawa and the Ottawa Valley, I know that our veteran-owned brewery and small businesses alike illustrate both the opportunity and the challenge. These enterprises are capital intensive, highly regulated and deeply community focused. They create local employment, contribute to municipal tax bases and serve as informal hubs for veteran connection and peer support, yet these broader social and economic benefits are not reflected in current VAC assessment models.

Veterans with service-related physical or mental health conditions face additional barriers, as entrepreneurship timelines rarely align with VAC's time-limited transition supports.

Finally, the administrative burden of managing a start-up alongside VAC compliance requirements can be overwhelming, particularly for veterans living with operational stress injuries. Based on lived experience, command-level responsibilities and financial stewardship, I respectfully offer five recommendations for the committee to consider.

First, formally recognize entrepreneurship as a legitimate and equal transition and rehabilitation outcome within VAC policy.

Second, establish a dedicated veteran entrepreneurship program, including start-up appropriate funding, clear income-benefit interaction guidance and access to veteran-specific mentorship.

Third, enhance entrepreneurship literacy within VAC through targeted training or the integration of external business expertise into decision-making.

Fourth, provide greater flexibility in transition timelines, particularly for veterans with service-related disabilities.

Finally, reduce administrative burden by aligning VAC processes with the operational realities of small businesses.

Veteran entrepreneurship represents an opportunity, not a liability. In communities like Petawawa, veterans are already contributing as employers, innovators and community leaders, often despite the system, not because of it.

● (1635)

With modernized policy and targeted support, VAC can enable these outcomes while maintaining accountability and responsible stewardship of public funds.

I thank you for your consideration and I welcome your questions.

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

Now we will have Mr. Mitic for five minutes.

Jody Mitic (Founder, Green Army Coffee): Good afternoon, Madam Chair. It's good to see you again. It's been a while.

Good afternoon, everyone.

My name is Jody Mitic.

I'd like to start by thanking everyone for this opportunity to speak today and give a special thank you to Eric Glavin for his help in making sure I appeared today, despite some communication issues.

I'm also proud to realize my own MP, Marie-France Lalonde, is chair of the committee, so I'll give a hearty hello to her.

To all committee members, thank you for your time today.

I will say a last hello to MP Blake Richards, whom I've met several times. I last saw him in the summer, when I received the King's coronation medal from Bob Zimmer for my work in advocating for veterans.

My story begins in 1994, when I enlisted in the reserves as a member of the Lorne Scots Regiment in Brampton, Ontario, as an infantryman.

I transferred to the regular army and joined the 1st Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment in 1997. My regular army career didn't have the best start, due to some poor decisions on my part, but once I got the hang of regular army life, I did well and I enjoyed it.

I deployed first to Kosovo in 1999 as a section light machine gunner in a 60 millimetre mortar crew. My next tour was to Kabul in 2003, as close protection and driver for the officers in our headquarters and signals company, located at the Kabul airport. Between Kosovo and Kabul, I was able to complete my signals recon, or recce, qualifications, and on 9/11, the terrorist attack happened while I was doing my basic sniper course in September 2001.

After Kabul, I continued training and achieved my sniper det commander qualification and master sniper qualification. This led to my deployment as a sniper detachment commander in 2006 with 1 RCR in Kandahar.

On January 11, 2007, I was unlucky enough to step on an IED, which cost me both feet below the knee, but I was lucky enough that none of my team were hurt and I managed to survive, although I left some meat, blood and bone in the Afghan soil forever.

Since then, I've had many adventures, including but not limited to having two amazing daughters, Aylah and Kierah, 17 and 14.

I managed to appear on season one of *The Amazing Race*, but I placed second. I ran successfully for Ottawa city council in 2014 and served proudly as the Innes Ward councillor, ward 2. I had to step away in 2018 due to personal circumstances. Marie-France, at the time, was my MPP.

I also released two books: *Unflinching: The Making of a Canadian Sniper*, which is an autobiography, and *Everyday Heroes*, a collection of war stories between now and World War II.

I also worked briefly at Veterans Affairs while General Natynczyk was the second in command there during the pandemic.

Between 2018 and 2022, I focused on my health and my kids and on looking for a way to make a living and occupy myself for the next 25 years. I decided, after a few false starts in other areas, to focus on developing my own brand and founded Green Army Coffee in the summer of 2022.

Green Army Coffee, or just Green Army, is focused on representing anyone who wears green for a living. I don't care what unit you're with or what qualifications you have or don't have; if you're a green collar, as I like to say, Green Army Coffee is your brand. I like to say that if you're overworked, underpaid and underappreciated, Green Army Coffee is here for you. Our mission is to provide a

culturally appropriate and safe setting for those in uniform, veterans and their families, and supporters, using the best coffee available and a positive attitude, with emphasis on rugged self-reliance, accountability, teamwork and shared social values.

I had always planned to start my own business after my career was over. I had always assumed that I'd do at least 25 years and retire with a half-decent pension. Getting wounded ruined and destroyed all those plans.

Unfortunately, and personally enraging, Parliament implemented the extremely flawed and short-sighted new veterans charter on May 5, 2005, under former prime minister Martin, effectively reducing financial compensation for my types of injuries from roughly \$3.4 million-plus over a lifetime to a simple one-time payment of \$250,000. That was outrageous and, in my opinion, a massive insult to anyone who goes into combat for a living.

I don't say these things lightly or for shock effect; I'm simply telling you my personal feelings and opinion about the circumstances I find myself in.

● (1640)

Lastly, I would put the current process and procedures I've encountered with Veterans Affairs Canada in regard to veterans seeking employment or entrepreneurship as puzzling and counterintuitive. I don't recall what it's called, but it's placing what amounts to be a roughly \$20,000 tax on anyone seeking to improve their income or start a personal business.

With that, I'd like to close and thank you for my time to address you. I'd be happy to take any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Mitic. It's a pleasure to see you again too.

We will begin our first round. Each member will have six minutes.

We will start with Mr. Richards.

Blake Richards (Airdrie—Cochrane, CPC): Thank you.

Thank you to both of you, first of all, obviously, for your service to our country, and also for the contributions today and the examples you set for your fellow veterans.

Mr. McNish, I'm a little disappointed that you didn't bring us any samples. I do want to ask you some questions about your business and some of the barriers you might face.

Before I do that, I actually want to turn to you, Mr. Mitic.

At the very end of your opening remarks, you mentioned what you called essentially a \$20,000 tax on veterans looking to earn an income or start a business. I know what you're talking about here, but I want to give you an opportunity to explain that a little bit more just for others' benefit. Personally, when this report is written, I think this needs to be included in it. I'd like to give you an opportunity to explain that more in your own words so that it's clear to everybody what you're referring to here.

• (1645)

Jody Mitic: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Again, I'm not 100% on all the terms. They've changed a lot over the last 20 years. I believe it's the income replacement benefit. The benefit part is weird to me. It's a compensation, not a benefit.

Last year I spent roughly 12 months not receiving my IRB. While talking to my case manager, I mentioned that I had these books, that I had podcasts and that I had started the Green Army brand. I mentioned it to my case manager. As well, my personal finances, my taxes and my administration were still quite jumbled. I let them know. It's not like I'm making any money on the company. At this point, I think I've only lost about \$500 this year.

All of that is to say that this \$20,000 limit seemed to be all the system cared about. For lack of a piece of paper from the CRA saying that Jody made only this, or he didn't make that, the administrative side of Veterans Affairs decided that it was better to cut me off and seek these administrative forms after they'd cut me off. Of course, they warned me, but I assumed that because I was talking to them, it wouldn't happen. It happened.

I resisted quite a bit—I think I chatted with you about it briefly—simply because, in my opinion, this shouldn't ever happen to anyone in my position. First of all, it's \$20,000 that I'm relying on. The confusion is that if I'm reporting that I'm making any money, the concern of Veterans Affairs, or this part of Veterans Affairs, is about whether I am making too much money, in their opinion. I'm not sure where this came from. I'm not sure who decided it was a good idea.

It was incredibly frustrating. It was incredibly disappointing. It caused a massive rift in my trust with Veterans Affairs and the outcomes that the system is seeking. Nowhere in my life did this help. This type of thing doesn't help.

Just as an aside, whenever I speak with anyone in the veterans community, this \$20,000 thing comes up all the time as a reason to stay where they are or not seek any improvement. They worry, because \$20,000 is significant. Even if I'm making an extra amount of money, I'm relying on this income for now.

I understand that there are all kinds of arbitrary definitions within there about why you can have certain amounts and why you cannot, but this particular process is probably the biggest barrier I've encountered. I can't speak for Richard or anyone else, but to me it

seemed to be massive overreach and completely unnecessary. As I said, it's counter to the outcomes VAC claims it wants for me.

Blake Richards: Exactly. I think that last point is really the important one. This is a benefit that you and other veterans have earned through your service to the country. The last thing the government should be doing is discouraging you from trying to contribute to your country in other ways now that you're a private citizen, whether that's starting a business or gaining employment income. The last thing we should be doing is discouraging that by taking something away from you that you've earned, frankly. Thank you for highlighting that.

I have a very brief period of time left to ask you both this question. I'll start with you, Mr. McNish, because you haven't had a chance yet, and then I'll go to Mr. Mitic, if there's time.

Can you tell us what your experience has been with Veterans Affairs in terms of your benefits, starting a business or any issues you've encountered personally that you'd like to share with this committee?

• (1650)

Richard McNish: Very briefly, I was lucky. I started my business before I actually released. I released on my own terms. I wasn't medically released. However, as Mr. Mitic just stated, once I got into the Veterans Affairs system, I was very open and very forward about the fact that I had a business with my family, my son, who's a current serving member. I didn't have the same frictions Jody had. However, when it came to the rehabilitation part and all the rest of it, the fact that I had a business already and wanted to focus on that was secondary to me going to university in Ottawa for four years to become an engineer in my mid-fifties.

That made absolutely zero sense. It sorted itself out, but where was the logic?

Blake Richards: Why are you being discouraged—

The Chair: I'm so sorry, Mr. Richards. I have to interrupt you.

As I mentioned, I am the clock keeper.

I apologize, Mr. McNish.

Mr. Mitic, we'll come back to you. I'm very certain of that.

I would like to go now to Mr. Casey for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank both our guests for being with us today and for their service.

I'll start with you, Mr. McNish. We're just in the second meeting of this study, but there are already some recurring themes emerging. We heard quite a bit at the last meeting about challenges in accessing capital. Another thing that struck me from what we heard at the last meeting and which I found quite interesting was the difference between the veteran population and everyone else when it comes to appetite for risk. I want to start with that second one.

You outlined in your opening remarks that your experience in the armed forces taught you about risk management. That was one thing you specifically referenced. The context in which we heard about the appetite for risk was that when you take someone who has made a conscious decision and spent a good part of their life in an unlimited liability situation, they're okay with risk. They get it.

I'd be interested in your perspectives and your comments around veterans distinguishing themselves from the rest of society in terms of appetite for risk and ability to manage it.

Richard McNish: Personally, I believe the Canadian Armed Forces does a very good job of teaching risk management, how to be able to analyze, identify and project what the potential risks are, and then, through that assessment, how to mitigate them. For the average citizen, something may look overwhelming, but for a well-trained, skilled military member or former member, it's not as daunting or as fearful in general. We've faced it within our own country, overseas, with the eye of the enemy or whatever it is. It's something that you've experienced and can fall back on.

Sean Casey: Let's talk about access to capital for a minute. You indicated that you started your business in 2020, I believe.

Richard McNish: It was 2019.

Sean Casey: Shortly after that, the pandemic hit, which was a really good time to be in the beer business.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Sean Casey: Would you disagree with that?

Richard McNish: It had its pros and cons.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Sean Casey: No, no, I didn't mean it to be a joke. I know that at least a couple of sectors really benefited during the pandemic. Alcohol was one. Video games was another. I'm sure there's a longer list than that.

My question for you is around access to capital. Did you have challenges accessing capital for what you call a nanobrewery? Do you feel that any of those challenges, if they existed, were connected or were distinguishable because of your status as someone reinventing themselves after so many years in the military?

• (1655)

Richard McNish: Well, my son and I bootstrapped everything from the beginning. As I said, I was still earning a paycheque twice a month, at that point. There was our own capital invested. We got a small line of credit from a credit union, which we were able to access based on our own personal finances.

There is no identifiable system out there that says, "We'll give to veterans", or "This is a veteran funding program", which kind of burns my soul. On the Veterans Affairs website currently, there are three programs listed for funding or for entrepreneurship—women, indigenous and Black. They're all valuable. Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to undervalue them at all, but—I hate to use this term—what about me? I served as well. I served for 32 years. I served my country honourably. I don't have the same access to those special programs that other demographics do.

I think that is wrong. For whatever reason, we are leaving out some very reputable talent from doing something very special.

Sean Casey: Thank you, Mr. McNish.

Mr. Mitic, on the same issue of access to capital, your business is certainly distinguishable from Mr. McNish's in that it's exclusively an online operation. It being an online operation and you having an interesting and varied career, did you face challenges with respect to access to capital that you felt were associated with your service?

Jody Mitic: When I first started, I asked about access to loans as a veteran and a new business owner and was told there was none. I even asked at the Business Development Bank of Canada. They said they didn't have anything like that. I didn't even realize that, as Richard pointed out, there was funding available on the VAC website.

Thus far, I've used all my own money. We are planning to go bricks and mortar this year—again, all under our own funding. I'm hoping that one day I will run into someone somewhere who will be able to say, "This is how you can access capital if you need it", and they will help me get there. I think I may have, but in terms of veteran-centric funding or capital available, thus far I haven't found any either.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Mitic. I have the clock in front of me and I need to interrupt you. I sincerely apologize.

Madam Gaudreau is next. She will be addressing you in French.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us.

I think it's really going to be important to highlight in the report certain shortcomings that mean that, unfortunately, you weren't recognized as you should have been to have access to additional help. I say that because younger people with no capital can be helped. People from diverse backgrounds, indigenous peoples and so on, can be helped. This is something that can be adjusted quickly.

We were talking about the pandemic earlier. Before I became a member of Parliament, I was an average citizen who started businesses without capital, who went to organizations like the Canada Deposit Insurance Corporation and everywhere else. I was told to keep going, to persevere, as it wouldn't happen without that. I was also told that, if I persevered, I would have a lot of barriers.

This is where I wonder whether, to be an entrepreneur, you really have to have a certain kind of personality because it's difficult. Earlier, we talked about the pandemic. My centre closed first. I lost \$200,000 net and almost went bankrupt as a member of Parliament. Yes, that's right.

For me, and I'm not trying to minimize anything, but it's important to visit....

We could talk about seniors who, when their income exceeds a few thousand dollars, no longer receive the pension they contributed to for decades. Again, I'm not saying this to minimize anything. What is important to know today is absolutely what is the very essence that enables you to give all the energy you need to develop your business without having barriers.

Are you being punished or not being rewarded enough?

This is a question for both of you, maybe for Mr. McNish first.

• (1700)

[English]

Richard McNish: There's an element of—I don't want to say punishment, because it's not a punishment, but it is a disadvantage. Honestly, I don't know what to say. You just have to push through it. If it's your passion and it's something you want to do, you just have to keep going and find your ways to do it with the limitations you have.

The \$20,000 clawback that Jody mentioned is a punishment. That's an absolute punishment. If you become successful, they're going to claw that money away from you. There are creative ways around that, but it shouldn't be the norm.

That's all I can really add to that.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Mr.... I'm looking for your name.

The Chair: It's Mr. Mitic.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Mitic, can you answer?

Jody Mitic: Thank you.

[English]

What's the question? Could you ask it one more time, please?

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Madam Chair, I'll ask for a break because I'm going to do it quickly.

If we look at the entire entrepreneurship population, we see that very, very young people are having issues, facing barriers.

Do you think the treatment you receive is so restrictive as to say that you're being punished, or on the contrary, that you're not being acknowledged enough?

[English]

Jody Mitic: As Richard said, I don't think it's a punishment, but I think it's a terrible oversight. I honestly have yet to really seek much help from Veterans Affairs. I did manage to do the Prince's Trust entrepreneur workshop in Newfoundland as well as access some of their resources virtually online to help.

I'm not saying I need encouragement or I need a cheerleading squad or anything, but a little bit more of a can-do attitude would be helpful. I'm trying to restart my life with this business and this brand. As Richard kind of pointed out, there's no real acknowledgement, or not that I've seen. Maybe there is in other quarters. It just seems to be a barrier that doesn't need to be there.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Given that I have only 30 seconds left, I'll stop here. When I have to repeat, I'm sorry, but I have the right to as much time as everyone else. I know you understand that we use both official languages.

I'll ask you the question in my next round, and you can think about it: What about everything you are seeing in terms of support from when you stop serving until your business is set up?

I get the impression that there's really something to work on a great deal because, as the rule dictates, we all stop at a stop sign; we have no choice. So there is a rule, but accommodations can be made. I'd like to hear from you later.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1705)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

So think about that, witnesses, for the next round.

We will now proceed to our second round.

[English]

Mr. Tolmie, you have five minutes.

Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to start off by thanking both our witnesses for their service.

Mr. Mitic, I don't know if you've ever been to the House of Commons, but the coffee here is really bad.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Fraser Tolmie: We were talking about free samples from Mr. McNish, but if you want to see better production out of your government, I think we could have better coffee here.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Fraser Tolmie: I just got a round of applause from my colleagues.

Blake Richards: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] good place for a new procurement rule.

Fraser Tolmie: A new procurement rule, yes.

I have a couple of things I'd like to cover.

Mr. Mitic, you mentioned “green collar”. You said it didn't matter, or you didn't care what you served or what your qualifications were. Then I heard about Mr. McNish having barriers with respect to access to capital and support.

I'd like you to touch on that, Mr. McNish. I know that it's a very delicate subject, but I think we need to have some honest answers for this committee about the challenges. If Mr. Mitic doesn't care, and just looks at you because you've served, shouldn't we be doing the same thing for veterans?

Richard McNish: The easy answer is yes.

Fraser Tolmie: Okay.

Richard McNish: We should be doing the same. A veteran is a veteran. The definition doesn't change because of background or service record or whatever. You're a veteran. Everybody should have equal opportunity. As I mentioned earlier, Veterans Affairs Canada needs to recognize that entrepreneurship is a transition. It is a means to a new life. There is more out there than going to school and being retrained. Whether you were a private or a full colonel or the chief of the defence staff, you have skills that have been developed that work and transfer over. They need to be utilized and fostered and grown. Allow them to do it.

Fraser Tolmie: Then my next question is, do you believe Veterans Affairs interferes with the quality of your life afterwards? My belief is that if you've served and you're entitled to benefits, you should be able to access them. From the witnesses we hear from, it seems that if you make a certain amount of income, you don't qualify for those benefits that you should qualify for.

Mr. Mitic, I'd like your thoughts on that first.

Jody Mitic: I'm sorry. What's the question, sir?

Fraser Tolmie: If you're entitled to benefits, it seems you're restricted based on your income. Benefits are there to provide for the challenges you face. That should be your base. If you make an income on top of that, my belief is that you should be able to do that.

It seems to be the other way around when it comes to benefits: “Do you know what? You make this amount of income, so we don't have to really pay you for the damages your body has gone through and for the emotional toll.”

Jody Mitic: I agree that it is a discouragement. Again, calling it a benefit is a mislabel, in my opinion. When it was implemented in roughly 2018 or 2020—I can't remember when—they called it a pension for life. I kind of forgot about the deposits, because I assumed it was for life. Later on, the administration caught up to me and asked me to prove that I didn't make too much money. Their only concern was that I was making too much money for their files.

It's a very unusual process. I questioned it when I heard about it a long time ago. What's the point of this if it's a pension for life? If it's a payment I've earned losing pieces of my body to high explosives, why would anyone care about a piece of paper? Never mind whether I'm making money or not, this is an income I'm counting on if I don't work again for the rest of my life.

I've had a few jobs. I've made a few bucks here and there. For me, though, the central issue is that, as I said, when the new veterans charter came in, all the financial support I would have received for the rest my life for my injuries was lost. I was allowed to make money, or not make money, as much as I wanted with that system.

To me, the core of my argument and my feeling is that I should be receiving a minimum amount of money per month, for life, from the government for my service injuries. Everything else I can do on top of that is good for me. I don't see why Veterans Affairs should be involved in any way but to encourage and support me.

Again, I don't need a cheerleading squad. I don't need the red carpet rolled out. I can take care of myself, for the most part, but this money is an acknowledgement of what happened.

● (1710)

Fraser Tolmie: I agree.

Jody Mitic: It is quite frustrating to have someone take it because I decided to go out and make a few bucks.

Fraser Tolmie: Yes.

Jody Mitic: Thank you.

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. D'Entremont, you have five minutes.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Mitic and Mr. McNish, again, thank you so much for your service. Thank you so much for being here today to help us try to unravel a little bit of the questions we have on entrepreneurship and Veterans Affairs.

When you spoke of your business, you talked about the fact that you already had the business, in a way. You were already doing some brewing, probably, with your son prior to your retirement. Did that make it easier or harder? By the sound of it, it made it a little harder.

I find that a lot of military members actually have a little bit of a side gig. Some have a second job. Some have a little business. My brother had a little store that he was running in Petawawa when he was there. How often does this happen? Did it cause a bit of a challenge in your transition?

Richard McNish: Personally, it didn't create a challenge. It actually helped the transition. It was 100% helpful, because I had something to go to. I have friends right now who are sitting in Petawawa and are scared to release from the Canadian Forces because they don't know what they're going to do with themselves. If you give them that olive branch, that opportunity, they will take it. It's more than just them.

It 100% helped me.

Chris d'Entremont: Is it something we should be conscious of during service, or is it something we bring up during transition? During service, I know that a lot of things are concentrated towards the mission, or the duties you have on base, or whether you get a ship to forward to, or whatever it is. Would it be advantageous to have some kind of entrepreneurship programming for military members?

Richard McNish: Yes. If there's access to something.... I don't want them to have to sit through more computer-based training, but if they're voluntarily looking for that, I think it should be before the transition starts. When the transition starts once they make that decision—they wake up on a Friday morning in June and say, “That's it, I'm done, I feel it”, and write the memo—I think that should already be in place. They have something to go to. They don't have to worry about transitioning, trying to figure out their life post and then trying to learn about or get educated on entrepreneurship. Not everybody's an entrepreneur, 100%. Some people want to be re-educated. That is perfectly fine, but I think the ones who are really, really interested in entrepreneurship should have that opportunity for training or some kind of development before they make that transition decision.

Chris d'Entremont: Your suggestions, which I wrote down quickly as you were making your points, include recognizing entrepreneurship; a dedicated entrepreneurship program; enhancing internal literacy within VAC on what entrepreneurship actually is and providing flexibility with transition. You also talked about timing and how long the transition might happen. Red tape reduction is the last. There's a lot of red tape involved in this.

You didn't talk about access to capital or maybe networking or some of those other items. Where would you like to see some of these things plugged in?

• (1715)

Richard McNish: I think if there's access to funding on a specific stream, that would be highly helpful. I believe I did mention veteran-specific mentorship. Like Mr. Mitic, I went through what was then the Prince's Trust entrepreneur camp and is now the King's Trust. They don't work with veterans anymore, unfortunately. That

program was outstanding. I did follow on with a mentorship there, but those mentors aren't veterans. They don't understand. To be perfectly honest with you, they're very good people, but some of them who are volunteering are looking to check a box on their résumé. They're helpful to an extent, but they don't understand our challenges. They don't understand who we are or where we've been.

Chris d'Entremont: I would probably have some more questions for Mr. Mitic, but I don't have enough time. I see the chair cutting me off.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You may get that star today, Mr. d'Entremont.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I'll go back to my question, Mr. McNish and Mr. Mitic. It's fundamental, and you just mentioned it: I need to be supported at the end of my service, but not by just anyone, especially not by a computer. I need someone who can understand what I went through during all my years of service to help me transition to civil society and to support me for as long as I need.

There are other issues, including administrative and monetary issues, but are we on the right track? I would like to hear your comments, but I have only a minute and a few seconds left.

Mr. McNish, go ahead.

[English]

Richard McNish: Yes, I believe so. I believe veteran-centric programming, with veteran people who know the background, would be very helpful—not forced on individuals but as an opportunity for them to voluntarily look at it and be taught in it.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Mr. Mitic, go ahead.

[English]

Jody Mitic: Yes, of course, anything that would help someone transition would be extremely useful. I understand there are other demographics in the world and things like that, but as veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces, we are a particular group of people. The biggest thing would be to try to support it and encourage it, if we can. That would be my basic comment.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I saved some time, but I am still concerned because I don't have the screen in front of me. I am thinking of Mr. McNish. It is appalling. It's flashing and it is distracting. I'm wondering if the technical team can turn it off, especially since there's also interpretation. I don't know how people are keeping up, but perhaps the screen should be turned off.

I'm done.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

We'll have the technical team look into that. Thank you for your concern for the witnesses. We really appreciate it.

[English]

I would now like to pass the floor to Mr. Viersen for five minutes.

Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here.

It's an interesting thing that entrepreneurship over the last decade has plummeted from about three people per 1,000 to one per 1,000. Do you think some of the challenges you're facing are perhaps kind of what the whole country is facing in terms of entrepreneurship challenges and not necessarily specific to veterans? What would be a particularly veteran challenge? It's an interesting thing that the CBC is reporting that entrepreneurship is down quite a bit over the last 10 years.

Mr. McNish.

Richard McNish: For the veteran specifically, there is no programming for them. They're not going to take that leap unless they have some kind of backing or other kind of support. For the average individual going through the transition centre on any base or garrison in Canada, that's not an option for them. That blocks them out.

Unless they had started something previously with their spouse, so that they could be employed...I don't know. I don't think it's just veteran specific for that particular statistic, but there is no support out there directly for veterans to increase that statistic either.

• (1720)

Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

Mr. Mitic.

Jody Mitic: I would echo what Richard just said. I think it's fair to say that everyone is in the same boat, veterans included. For me, the fact is that we're here to discuss the future of veterans. Regardless of what challenges veterans may be facing in entrepreneurship or anything, it's beneficial for Veterans Affairs to seek ways to help us achieve and be successful regardless of anything else, because that's a success story. Richard's business being around for however many years, that's success. My company, once we get going, will be a VAC success story, a veteran success story and so on.

The barriers to entrepreneurship getting higher might just be an indication of the overall picture in the country. As far as veterans

are concerned, you give us a little bit of support and you watch us fly. We're a pretty resilient group of folks.

Arnold Viersen: To me, doing comparisons with other countries, such as Australia and the United States—you may have a perspective on this as well—it just feels like particularly in the United States, veteran-owned business is a big.... You hear that all the time. It feels like the banks seem to have a dedicated program for veterans down there.

Do you see that in the United States? What's your experience dealing with Canadian banking? I know that if you have a university degree, that will lower your interest rate and things like that. Does being a veteran do something similar, or is that something the whole system fails to recognize?

I'll go to Mr. Mitic first and then Mr. McNish.

Jody Mitic: I would say that the Americans have it figured out. They take care of their troops. They take care of their veterans through the banks, through associations, community charities and the whole gamut. They take care of each other very well.

As for ourselves, I'm not saying Canadians don't take care of us, but we do have our challenges. As I said, I originally went to my bank. I went to BDC. I went to a few other places. No one had a veteran-specific lending program, so to speak. I approached a few not-for-profits or charities, and it was, you know, a wishy-washy situation: What if the business fails?

Arnold Viersen: Mr. McNish.

Richard McNish: I don't have any experience with the American system, but I do know from research and from talking to others that, as Jody said, they have it down. In Canada, veterans are good and something to work with when they're in the media. Then something pauses in the media: We're at war in Afghanistan. As soon as the war ended—pfft.

Arnold Viersen: Has any bank ever recognized that?

Richard McNish: No. The only bank that recognizes veterans is the Bank of Montreal, only because they have a paid partnership with the Department of National Defence or the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services.

That's it.

Arnold Viersen: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Hirtle, you have five minutes.

Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm happy to have you with us.

I'd like to come back to the transition period and the experience you have had with VAC. The whole point behind the study is to come up with some new ways of thinking about how we make it better and how we help in the experience for the people coming along after you.

You've talked about entrepreneurship not being listed as a viable option when you were going through your transition period. I'm wondering if there would be value in there being a veteran on staff at VAC who has entrepreneurial experience acting as a kind of business coach to introduce the idea and to provide some coaching.

Mr. McNish.

• (1725)

Richard McNish: Yes. I believe there is somebody there currently and very recently. It's Christina Connelly, if I remember her name correctly. I do believe that she's an entrepreneur herself. She now works in VAC. She's starting a program.

Just this fall, I was at a conference at the University of Ottawa because they started a new program that VAC will pay for under a short course. Yes, I think that more embedded individuals within VAC who are veterans, who have that V beside their name, and even more who have a V and an entrepreneurial background, is 100%.

Alana Hirtle: Okay.

Mr. Mitic.

Jody Mitic: Definitely, I would agree with that. If Veterans Affairs went looking for individuals to help out, I'm sure there are plenty of other veterans who are entrepreneurs and would be happy to get involved.

I have had some help with other veterans helping me. They've mentored me and they've given me a lot of advice. We do lean on each other quite a bit, but a dedicated individual at VAC would probably help things along quite a bit.

Alana Hirtle: Okay. Thank you.

In a previous study this year, we heard from people that possibly it would be helpful to have information from VAC earlier, more than a few months before they're leaving service. Would entrepreneurship as an option being introduced maybe six or 12 months before you are discharged be a benefit in terms of having time to do some business planning and research and figure out what the pros and cons would be?

Mr. McNish.

Richard McNish: Yes.

Right now, the Canadian Armed Forces has the SCAN program, the second career assistance network program, which the base personnel selection officers run a couple of times a year.

They call it a second career assistance network, but that's a sham name, because there's no career in there. They talk about medical releases. They talk about pensions. They talk about all these different programs, but they don't say one thing about a second career. They don't say anything about entrepreneurship. VAC will get up there...but when I was released in October 2022, part of my clearing out and transition was to talk to a VAC case manager. It was a five-minute phone call asking me if I had a My VAC account. That was it, literally.

Everything I have done post release I have done on my own, through my own network, where I have learned things, understood things and have had to go out and look at stuff.

Alana Hirtle: Mr. Mitic, was yours a similar experience?

Jody Mitic: My experience when I transitioned was a little different with my injuries and stuff. I don't recall it ever coming up. I released in 2014. It was never brought up at the time, to be honest.

Alana Hirtle: Thanks.

I have a minute left. I think you've both mentioned networks. I know that there isn't one veterans entrepreneurial network out there. There are a handful of them, I gather. Would there be benefit in some kind of organized official network for veteran entrepreneurs? How would that look?

Richard McNish: Yes, I believe there would be, if Veterans Affairs assisted and supported somewhere. I know there is a veteran out there who has recently created a veterans entrepreneur network. I believe it's called VBNI. Don't quote me on that. I believe that he will be a witness in this committee at some point.

There are things like that out there, but they're all regionally centric. The NCR has a lot of resources. The Ottawa Valley has zero resources.

If you go to southwestern Manitoba because you retired out of Shilo, there's nothing for you. You are in no man's land. You might as well be in the middle of the Sahara.

Alana Hirtle: I'm out of time.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Yes, you are, but thank you very much.

This will conclude our first panel.

I want to say, on behalf of our committee, thank you very much to both of you for your service. Thank you for coming to share with us some of the challenges, but also your success.

I was following a little bit on my phone here, and I do believe, from a coffee perspective, Jody, some members of our committee would love to go and drink coffee at your location. Keep us informed. I'm sure many of us will do that.

Mr. McNish, from a brewery perspective, I think it's also good that we're aware you're very close by.

To both of you, thank you again.

We'll suspend and say a proper goodbye.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1735)

[Translation]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I invite all the committee members back to the table. I know it's a bit loud behind me, so I'll wait a bit.

Thank you very much.

[English]

We have two witnesses for our second hour.

From the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, we have Mr. Brandon Dyck and Dustin Gareau.

You both will have five minutes, and then we will open the floor for our members of Parliament to ask questions.

The floor is yours, Mr. Dyck, for five minutes.

Brandon Dyck (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Brandon Dyck. Today, I'm representing the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. IBEW Canada currently represents 70,000 active and retired members in various industries ranging from utilities, construction, transportation and telecommunications to government and national defence.

Canadian Armed Forces veterans starting businesses can face skill gaps and limited specialized support. However, their leadership, discipline and technical skills are highly valuable to the electrical industry and to Canada's economy.

A significant barrier to entrepreneurship is a lack of industry-specific technical training. Central to our strategy is an enduring partnership with Helmets to Hardhats Canada. This collaboration provides veterans with access to Red Seal apprenticeships. A job isn't enough for the aspiring entrepreneur. They need a path to ownership that starts once they have completed an apprenticeship and have become a journeyed electrical worker.

Apprenticeships range from the power line technicians with one of our publicly owned electric utilities to the industrial electricians who build major infrastructure projects. Network cabling specialists are also in demand to help build data centres and to keep our major institutions and communities connected to each other during major crises, such as windstorms, wildfires or ice storms.

By working alongside our signatory contractors and joint training centres, we're teaching veterans all the tools of the trade. We're teaching them how to bid on contracts, manage payroll and scale up an electrical contracting firm by utilizing our national workforce dispatch system. Also, with the federal government's union training and innovation program, we can further upskill veterans to keep up with an ever-evolving trade.

We recognize that entrepreneurship is a marathon and not a sprint. Our commitment to supporting veterans transitioning to civilian life is demonstrated through our veterans caucus. It serves as a cornerstone of our outreach, providing a peer-to-peer mentorship network that is crucial for successful integration into the electrical trade and the union community.

We can advocate for better on-the-ground support for veterans, meeting them where they live and work. Through our local unions, we ensure that veterans starting businesses receive community support, including a network of brothers and sisters ready to offer local expertise and their first contract.

A green economy is the next great mission for Canada. With the recent implementation of the clean electricity investment tax credits, there's a massive demand for electrical contractors, and we're positioning veteran entrepreneurs to lead this charge.

Finally, we cannot speak of Canadian entrepreneurship without centring indigenous participation. Many of our veterans are indigenous, and they face the double burden of systemic barriers. IBEW local unions are actively partnering with indigenous groups to ensure that veteran-led businesses are not just in the city but also in the north and in first nations communities.

Thank you.

● (1740)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dyck.

Mr. Gareau, go ahead for five minutes.

Dustin Gareau (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers): Madam Chair and members of the committee, I'm honoured to speak with you today on behalf of my veteran comrades.

My name is Dustin Gareau. I'm a brother of the IBEW. I'm a veteran, and I'm currently a serving member of the Canadian Armed Forces. I've been serving with them since 2009. I currently serve with 49th Field Artillery Regiment out of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. It's been an honour to serve my country.

I'm here to discuss this committee's purpose of identifying barriers that veterans face in entrepreneurship.

In 2022, I started my own business in electrical contracting. I united my business with the IBEW and their constitution. It's well known that starting a small business requires access to capital and funding resources. During the start-up and initial growth of my business, funding allocated toward veteran entrepreneurship by the Canadian government was inaccessible.

Business start-up funding programs exist for numerous other demographic groups, but they are non-existent for veterans. Regular force members, upon their release from the CAF, can access an education and training benefit program. However, this funding cannot be used directly towards business start-ups and growth costs. This creates a significant barrier for a veteran starting their own business opportunity.

This is specific to me, being a reservist. With a countrywide shortage of personnel in the armed forces, there's more pressure placed on each member to fulfill more than their standard duty. The time and the mental strain this requires of both regular and reserve force personnel takes away from home life and alternate career possibilities. With the current crisis state of armed forces staffing, being able to balance the time commitment requirements of a young business and the expectations of a part-time service member is truly a feat.

As stated above, programs focused on veteran entrepreneurship funding are either inadequate or non-existent. Every member of the Canadian Armed Forces sacrifices a significant amount of personal time and energy in service to their country. Their personal growth of owning their own business should be celebrated and supported by the Canadian government. All reasonable career paths for veterans after release should be supported with fair and equal access to funding programs.

Entrepreneurial career paths should be supported at the same level as retraining programs and could be funded with the goal of supporting veterans in obtaining or creating a sustainable income outside of the CAF. Removing the initial barrier of access to funding would assist all veterans on the path to starting and owning a successful business and to supporting their local community and economy.

Thank you all for your time. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Gareau, and thank you for your service to our country.

We will now start our first round of questions, and I will invite Mrs. Wagantall to take the floor for six minutes.

Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you so much for being here. I really appreciate it.

We're talking about entrepreneurs and the opportunity for veterans. From the testimony, we've heard that, when our veterans transition, it's a process. For many of those we've talked to, it takes about a decade after service, especially for a lot of those who have served overseas or whatever and have some challenges to process through all of that. It takes them about a decade to get to where they're able to be the entrepreneur that they have within themselves.

How did you find the process? You're still serving.

Dustin Gareau: Personally, the time commitment was the hardest part. To be a reservist, you give up a lot of what I'd like to call free time; it's the time spent with my family that I don't get. When most people are spending their summers in the Muskokas or kicking up their feet on a boat somewhere, reservists are training. They are spending their summers away from their families. There's not a lot of time for self-improvement, especially if you're trying to work a full-time job while also working part time with the reserves. I found it was difficult to get the allocated time. It's not like in the regular force, where you get out of the regular force and go through a transition period where you have a payment that helps you to move into what you want to do. In the reserves, it's just, "Here you go; figure it out".

• (1745)

Cathay Wagantall: That's a whole other story, isn't it, in comparison to what we're studying.

Mr. Dyck, you mentioned that you work with Helmets to Hardhats. I wrote that down before you even started speaking. I appreciate that whole initiative.

How exactly do you engage the veterans? Do they work through the whole Red Seal apprenticeship program and then have the opportunity to participate in Helmets to Hardhats? Is that part of the process?

Brandon Dyck: Generally, from what I understand at this point, Helmets to Hardhats is recruiting, and then they'll find a local union in order to start an apprenticeship.

Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

You talked about a marathon. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Brandon Dyck: Absolutely.

I once started a business myself when I was very young. In order to start that business—installing high-speed Internet—I received a small loan of \$10,000. This was back in 2000. That loan was to buy a vehicle, ladder and tools. However, to be able to grow from that into a larger business takes plenty of time, a lot of liability and a lot of time away from your family. Any assets that you might have personally have to be poured back into that business, which, of course, is another stressor.

Cathay Wagantall: From a veteran's perspective, having just gone through that transition you're talking about, Dustin, that isn't the same for you. We've been studying that process for a decade now—actually, longer than that—and there isn't a clear approach to that. Of the individuals who testified just before you, who have their small businesses, one made it clear that what they need is flexibility in transition timelines.

Do you have any stats on those who are engaging? Where are they across the country? How do they find out? Are you basically a service for Helmets to Hardhats in that they do the work of finding the veterans and then you engage them?

Brandon Dyck: First off, I'll clarify that I'm not a veteran myself.

Cathay Wagantall: Yes, I understand that.

Brandon Dyck: As far as the timelines are concerned, yes, Helmets to Hardhats is providing us with those veterans who want to transition into the trade. Then the local union will take them through the specific training centres that we have. Each local union has a training centre that it's partnered with that will provide them with the apprenticeship training or place them into a public sector post-secondary institution that is providing the Red Seal training.

Cathay Wagantall: The Red Seal training.... We've heard from a lot of veterans that they do an awful lot of education while they're serving but, even though there are a lot of similarities, they don't have anything when they come out. Basically, the expectation is that you now start working on.... Although they've been electricians, they've done various roles and have had to do the work to get the ability to do those jobs.

Is there any room for the transfer over of education so that they aren't having to start at the very beginning, or is it just a given that they have to because it's a union dynamic?

Brandon Dyck: Yes, definitely. A lot of our training centres have a skills gap assessment or a pre-apprenticeship training program to get into the trade to make sure they understand the tools and the basic requirements, and to ensure it is something they want to pursue. This makes sure that we have high completion rates and that we're qualifying people who are really interested in the trade.

A lot of those skills that are learned within the armed forces will set them up for success later on.

Cathay Wagantall: Can you give us any idea of how many veterans have gone through the program you're working on with them in the various fields of construction, electrical and whatnot, and where they are from across Canada?

Brandon Dyck: Unfortunately, no. I don't have that information off the top of my head now.

The Chair: You have four seconds.

Cathay Wagantall: No, not off the top of your head, but could you supply it?

Brandon Dyck: We could find it, yes.

Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. It's appreciated.

We will now go to Madam Dandurand.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Dandurand, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Marianne Dandurand (Compton—Stanstead, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to speak in French, so I will give you some time to put your device on.

• (1750)

[*Translation*]

First of all, witnesses, thank you very much for joining us to testify on this important topic of veterans transitioning to civilian occupations.

Mr. Gareau, you are an electrician in civilian life. Was that your job in the armed forces, as well?

[*English*]

Dustin Gareau: I apologize. It doesn't seem to be translating for me.

Marianne Dandurand: Isn't it working? I'm going to ask it in English.

You're an electrician in civilian life. Were you also an electrician in the army?

Dustin Gareau: No. In the military, I was a weapons technician until I was promoted to warrant officer. In the RCEME trade, you'd change over to be a land equipment engineering technologist. It's a whole thing.

Marianne Dandurand: Okay, so it's totally different.

Dustin Gareau: Yes. While I was training with the military in the summers, I was simultaneously working on my apprenticeship when I was not doing electrical training with the military. I was qualified for both things around the same time.

Marianne Dandurand: I don't know if you have colleagues who formerly worked in electrical, but my line of questioning is mostly.... Is there any recognition of your work? This is union work, being an electrician, so is there a pathway to recognize the knowledge that you have from the army to civilian life?

Dustin Gareau: Absolutely, there is, but it's very niche and very limited. For example, my trade is part of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers branch, the RCEME branch, and part of that is we get a bit of electronics and a bit of electrical, depending on what trade you are in. If you're an electronics and optics technician, you're very specialized in electronics. A lot of those skills are transferable to electrical. I believe that in the air force, there is an electrical technician trade, and that's pretty much hour for hour for electricians.

It depends on what trade you're in. It's not always transferable. It depends what it is.

Marianne Dandurand: Generally speaking, do you think it's quite easy to have the knowledge or competency recognized for union work, or is it a hurdle?

Dustin Gareau: With the IBEW, it was pretty easy. They recognized there are some transferable skills, but I can't say that for every union and I can't say that for every employer.

Marianne Dandurand: What help was there from the union? Can you characterize how they helped you?

Dustin Gareau: I wouldn't so much say that the union helped me with my business. It was more that I tapped into the union because I was already a union brother. I believe in the system they have set up and in place. I believe in the quality of life they have for their employees.

When I became an employer myself, I wanted my employees to have the same quality of life. I bought into the union because I was already part of the union.

Marianne Dandurand: From both of your perspectives, do you think we in Canada are using the full potential of veterans as entrepreneurs?

Dustin Gareau: I believe that Canada, through the forces, is training some of the best leadership and managerial staff you could possibly have. I'm a warrant officer in the military, so I've done multiple levels of leadership training and managerial training. I take a lot that I've learned and apply it directly to my business, so I feel like there's an untapped market that Canada is missing out on by not promoting the ability to be an entrepreneur in the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Marianne Dandurand: Mr. Dyck, can you answer the same question?

[English]

Brandon Dyck: Yes, I think that's an easy one. There are a lot of skills.

Being an international union, we've seen from our military members from the United States that the power line technicians who come out of the armed forces are very skilled. They comprise a lot of our membership in the States. They do a lot of community rebuilding after some of the high-impact storms. For us in Canada versus what I've seen south of the border, it's definitely an untapped resource.

• (1755)

Marianne Dandurand: How can we better use the skill sets that they have? What type of framework should we have? Is it from unions like yours outside of the government? What's your perspective on that?

Brandon Dyck: I certainly think that a partnership with government.... Building trades unions have already proven that they partner well with government. Through very minimal financial resources, we're able to support workers, whether or not they're veterans. To have that specific experience of veterans supported by each other, like what we've done with that veterans caucus, absolutely, I think we can do a great job by being a force multiplier for the government.

[Translation]

Marianne Dandurand: I don't have any time left.

Thank you very much for having me practise my English.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dandurand.

We'll now go to the second round of questions.

[English]

For five minutes, we have Mr. Richards.

[Translation]

I'm sorry, I made the same mistake again.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's fine, Madam Chair. I asked myself that question, as well.

Witnesses, for people who are following our proceedings and for people who need role models like you, I'd like to know more about who you are. What are you proud of?

[English]

Dustin Gareau: Yes, as I said, I'm definitely proud of the time I have spent with the military—the friends I have made, the experiences I've been through. It honestly has helped shape a lot of my life and a lot of my decisions. The morals and ethics the Canadian Forces instills upon members are an invaluable resource. That's why I moulded my business around a lot of the same ethics and ethos that are taught there.

I'm trying my darndest to hire more veterans in my business. We currently have three veterans on staff, and I'm trying to hire more. It's up to the union to allow me to bring in more of them. We'll see how that goes.

Brandon Dyck: As a union member, I'm very proud of the programs we have to support workers to enhance health and safety. They overlap very well with the ethics of the armed forces. In the limited interactions I've had over the last couple of years with our veterans and the veterans caucus, I'd say it's a great fit for being a part of the community, having that production mindset and being of service. I think that also fits very well within the unionized building trades.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: We've heard repeatedly that there's nothing better than someone who has experienced the Canadian Armed Forces. We have you as an example.

I find that interesting. Obviously, Mr. Gareau, you are experiencing it from the inside, but you have also been supported by people like Mr. Dyck, who have not been part of the Canadian Armed Forces.

On the other hand, how did you feel when, among brothers in arms, there were things you experienced and the union's prosperity, despite the fact that you did not serve?

[English]

Dustin Gareau: Honestly, the IBEW is very similar to the military, even down to their union meetings. They are held the exact same way we would hold our mess committee meetings. It's identical. It kind of freaked me out the first time I was at one.

It's a brotherhood. I say "brotherhood", but obviously we have sisters and other members as well. There's that esprit de corps, that morale of being around like-minded individuals who want to do something meaningful and build something that hasn't been built before, basically relying on each other. Foundationally, it's the exact same as the military. That's why it was an easy sell for me to unionize my own business. Not many employers do that. I got some weird looks when I did it, but it's working out pretty well for me, so I'm pretty happy with the decision.

As I said, the IBEW's a very good place for veterans.

• (1800)

Brandon Dyck: Dustin has put it very well. In terms of additional comments, it's about the capacity the union provides not only in the workforce, but also in additional training and any upskilling that's required for a specific job. That's an important aspect, because this industry is continually changing. It's about a support network that everyone is putting back into to further grow the industry and at the same time build camaraderie so that everyone becomes stakeholders within the industry as well.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You remind me of what we are experiencing in Quebec. I experienced it for a number of years. In employability, we call them work internships.

What we're seeing is collegiality and similarity being found, instead of saying that you're just going to be veterans because it's only among other veterans that understanding can be found. You must have the ability to adjust, adapt and understand each other.

In closing, I would like you to tell us about your best practices and what is essential, particularly as a veteran, in the support you provide and in what you experience. I would like you to send us that information.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

Now, we will officially move on to the second round of questions for our meeting.

[English]

Mr. Richards, you have five minutes.

Blake Richards: As I've been sitting here and listening to the conversation so far, I've been thinking that the trades are a perfect fit for veterans and that veterans are a perfect fit for the trades. I guess that leads me to some questions around how we can ensure that more veterans are aware of the opportunities in the trades. Clearly, we need more people in the trades. I know that a lot of veterans out there would like to have something they could find in their new lives that would give them fulfillment, and the trades could certainly do that. My questions will be centred around how we can make that happen.

I'll start with you, Mr. Dyck.

You mentioned that you work with Helmets to Hardhats. They are essentially a referral source to you guys in order to help get veterans started. What role does Veterans Affairs play in that, if any?

Brandon Dyck: I honestly don't know, but I think it could be expanded.

Blake Richards: It sounds like that's a problem. What role could they play? If we wanted to get more veterans involved, what role could VAC play?

Brandon Dyck: I'll put my labour organizer hat on and say that if we can meet veterans where they are and have the opportunity to talk about what a good union job can provide to veterans while they're transitioning, that would be a great opportunity for the unions to find that workforce, develop that workforce and talk frankly about the opportunities they're looking for.

Blake Richards: It's really just awareness, then, and making veterans aware of the opportunities that are available to them. That's kind of what you're saying.

Along that same note, Mr. Gareau, with your business, you said you'd like to offer more veterans opportunities. Would you concur? Would you add anything to that? What could Veterans Affairs do to try to help create those opportunities for more of your fellow veterans?

Dustin Gareau: Honestly, I think a lot of it comes down to transition phases. Let's say you have members releasing or they know they're going to release. Maybe Veterans Affairs could have a pre-release discussion with them asking what they want to do. If any of them say they want to be in the trades or do something with their hands, since that's what they enjoyed doing in the military, maybe that's where Veterans Affairs could already have a predetermined or set group of entities, such as the unions, that are already looking for that talent and would like to, as Mr. Dyck said, meet them where they're at and offer those right off the table.

That could maybe eliminate a whole bunch of issues, such as funding issues. I know that you have programs in place to establish regular force members and continue paying them for a little bit as they transition, but if they go right into a union where they're making good money and good pension and benefits right away, you wouldn't even need that. It could actually save the government some money. It's about the relationships and about the networking that needs to happen.

• (1805)

Blake Richards: It sounds like common sense. It sounds like something that could happen pretty easily. It's kind of shocking to think that it isn't already happening, right? Obviously, that needs to be something we make into a recommendation.

I think you mentioned that in addition to being a veteran, you are employing a couple of other veterans already.

Dustin Gareau: Yes. I have three on staff.

Blake Richards: For you, for those other veterans working with you or for other friends you have, is there anything you want to tell us in terms of your experience with Veterans Affairs, whether it's related to getting involved in the trades, starting a business or otherwise? If there are some issues that you have encountered or others have encountered and that you think should be fixed or improved, I guess this is an opportunity for you to tell us.

Dustin Gareau: Yes.

One of my apprentices was a regular force vehicle technician for 12 years and kept hurting himself all the time. When working on big trucks you end up smashing your head or smashing your back and you have bumps and bruises all the time. He tried to put in some VAC claims for head injuries and stuff, and he expressed to me that it was sometimes difficult to get through that process.

It's almost like you have to hit very specific guidelines to qualify for the VAC program. If that were reviewed and opened up a bit, maybe that could help a lot of the members coming out, and then it would be easier for them to figure out what they want to do.

Blake Richards: That makes a lot of sense.

Am I getting a signal that this is it, Chair?

The Chair: Yes. You're 10 seconds over.

Blake Richards: All right. I guess the next question is now irrelevant. Hopefully, I'll get another opportunity.

Thank you.

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

Mr. Casey, you have five minutes.

Sean Casey: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to both of you for being here with us.

Mr. Gareau, thank you for your service. Also, thank you for meeting with me in my office some months ago. It was pretty clear early in our conversation that you belonged in this room as part of this study. The nature of tradespeople is one of independence and is inherently entrepreneurial. It's a great fit, and I'm glad you're here.

Mr. Dyck, right off the top you talked about a path to ownership, and now you have an owner sitting beside you.

Mr. Gareau, I want you to talk about your path to ownership. If we have time, I'll come back to you about some of the union's programs.

When you were in the forces, if I understand correctly, it wasn't in an electrical trade.

Dustin Gareau: Yes.

Sean Casey: After you discharged, did you go through the process of getting getting your Red Seal?

Dustin Gareau: No. I'm still currently serving with the military part time as a reservist.

Sean Casey: Okay.

Dustin Gareau: I've never actually released or transitioned. I was never regular forces. I worked full-time contracts for quite a few years and then worked part time. I never had to experience that transitional period. I can speak only of friends and employees who did.

Sean Casey: Okay. You are a business owner employing electricians. How many?

Dustin Gareau: I believe there are about eight or nine electricians on staff right now.

Sean Casey: Are they all members of the IBEW?

Dustin Gareau: Yes, it's the IBEW.

Sean Casey: If you can take me through that path to ownership, how did you go from being with the military to becoming a business owner? There had to be something happening in between there.

Dustin Gareau: Yes, for sure.

I was an electrician simultaneously working for the military part time. The military, as I've said, taught me the proper ethos: ethics, morals, values, how to treat my people and also how to lead people instead of bossing people, which was a big one.

Also, as an electrician, I worked for a lot of other electrical companies and I've seen the opposite of what I've seen in the military. Simultaneously, I've seen a lot of failures from those electrical companies, because they prioritize their pockets over their employees and their customers.

Just using some common sense, I thought, why not take what I've learned in the military, apply it to my own business and see how that works out? That's what I did. I got fed up with working for other contractors. I started working for myself and started employing people in the same way that I would treat them and care for them if they were working for me in the military. It seems to be a pretty successful avenue.

• (1810)

Sean Casey: This is my last question for you.

At one point, in an answer to another question from another member of Parliament, you said it's up to the union whether you can hire more. Explain to me the relationship between you and the union, and why they would have any say in the growth of your business.

Dustin Gareau: Like the military, the union has very set guidelines, controls and parameters that contractors have to abide by. That isn't to enforce anything bad; it's just to make sure there's fairness across the board.

One hurdle is that if you want to hire a certain type of individual, like a veteran, technically, that goes outside of how the union does things. The way I hire people is by putting a call into the local hall and saying that I need three electricians full time or that I need three electricians for six weeks. It depends on the jobs I have lined up. They have seniority, in fairness. When a person is laid off, they're put on the list. As they sit there longer and longer, they rise on that list and they're the next ones to be called.

To bypass that, the union would have to make some decisions. That's outside of my hands. That's in his hands—not him specifically, but he works for the organization that controls that.

Sean Casey: It looks like I'm not going to get to you, Mr. Dyck.

Thank you both for being here.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Gaudreau will be addressing you in French, so make sure you are ready.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Gentlemen, we will receive your best practices and highlights. Now, if you can, I would like you to show that listening to needs and ensuring that services are provided over time makes a difference for veterans in transition.

[*English*]

Dustin Gareau: Would you mind repeating that?

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Without the union, without the network, would you be where you are today, Mr. Gareau?

[*English*]

Dustin Gareau: No.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Why?

[*English*]

Dustin Gareau: I could have been a non-union company. That would have allowed me to dictate what I pay for pensions and benefits and everything. However, being with the union has allowed me to tap into tradespeople who are more experienced than you could ever imagine. They're guys who have worked on things that most people never get to work on. I have some of the best qualified technicians in my business than you can find in most places, and I have only eight of them.

The union is a very good pool of resources and manpower that holds a very high standard for its tradespeople overall. If the tradespeople don't hold a good standard, the union doesn't do well, so the union enforces that everybody is a good employee and maintains the standard it sets.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Is that what you're seeing with most veterans in your community, Mr. Dyck?

[*English*]

Brandon Dyck: I would say that as an institution, we're democratic. Even as a representative, I started as a member. I think that's very similar to the armed forces. You work your way up through the ranks. You prove yourself. We have those constitutional guardrails. We have objectives, as well, in our community.

The veterans I've met find that camaraderie and, again, that overlap, and they see that opportunity. It's not just about building those technical skills, but those soft skills as well, and being a part of another broader community and giving back.

• (1815)

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Mrs. Wagantall is next.

You have five minutes.

Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

I'm trying to understand this. You have your own business and you work with the union, but you want to hire veterans. Provincially, there are labour laws around what you can and can't ask for in job descriptions. How did you get the veterans that you do have on staff? How many are there? Did you say that you have three out of the eight?

Dustin Gareau: I have staff who aren't exactly electricians. My wife is a veteran as well. She does our books and our paperwork. I brought my apprentice into the union with me when I unionized the business. That's a way to bring people into the union. As you're unionizing, you bring them in. Right now the three of us are the veterans on staff right now. I'm trying to get more, but....

Cathay Wagantall: But....

I'll be sharing, but I have one more question.

Helmets to Hardhats is clearly focused on veterans. How do they get the veterans from the unions? I understand that you have a hierarchy. As they finish a job, they get back in line. How does that work?

Dustin Gareau: The union can bring veterans in, no problem and no questions. The stipulation is that I as an employer cannot specifically request a certain person based on their background.

Cathay Wagantall: You can choose a veteran.

Dustin Gareau: Well, there are certain ways that I can hire people. I can name hire 50%. Let's say I have to hire 10 people. For five of them, I can pick who they are, but I'd have to know they're on the list, and I'd have to know that they're a veteran if I wanted to bring a veteran on staff.

Cathay Wagantall: Is it a situation where you have to indicate that you want this particular type of person?

Dustin Gareau: I'd have to name them.

Cathay Wagantall: Okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: You have some time left. Are you sharing it?

Cathay Wagantall: Yes. I'm sharing it with Mr. Tolmie.

The Chair: Perfect.

Mr. Tolmie, you have two and a half minutes.

Fraser Tolmie: Okay.

Thank you very much for your testimony.

Mr. Gareau, I would like to briefly touch on something and then I have a couple of other questions.

You talked about being a reservist. You said there are obstacles. Obviously, there are obstacles in your own personal time management between work and then serving. Can you share a little bit more on this? Are there obstacles in now having your own business and the challenges with being a reservist?

Dustin Gareau: There are, but I wouldn't say they've always been there. It's more of a systemic issue now. It's due to the lack of personnel in the Canadian Forces. They're trying to maintain the same momentum and progress with fewer people. Unfortunately, especially for people like me who are in a leadership position, that just means more of a workload. Well, I still work the same amount of hours every week.

Cathay Wagantall: Do you get paid more?

Dustin Gareau: No. We don't get paid more.

Fraser Tolmie: When you see someone and they're in the military, do you tell them you want to hire them? Do they have to be an electrician or are you training them? You're a unionized shop. Do they have to go through the program, or do they have to be a certified electrician when you're hiring?

Dustin Gareau: There are two answers to that question. I can bring electricians into the hall. If I put a call into the hall and they can't fill the call, then I can hire somebody off the street and bring them into the hall. I did this with somebody two months ago. That answers the first part of the question.

Next, let's say I find somebody who's not an electrician. I want to bring them in just because they're a veteran and a very smart person. They're a hard-working person who has good morals and they're exactly what I'm looking for as an employer. Unfortunately, I can't name hire apprentices off the street. At that point, my hands are a bit tied. The best I can do is tell them that the union hires once or twice a year. They can apply and hopefully get in. Then, if the stars align and I put in a call for a first-term apprentice, hopefully I will get them.

• (1820)

Fraser Tolmie: That quickly comes to the challenge of where we've had people exit the military and their qualifications don't line up with civilian standards.

Is that an issue, Mr. Dyck?

Brandon Dyck: Yes, it's certainly an issue. The Red Seal trade is designed to enable portability across the country, so if the standard at the armed forces level isn't meeting that other national level to build residentially, for instance.... There are some skills that will not transfer, but that's where we can fill those gaps and train up those workers.

We also have other traits. We have power line technicians and data cabling specialists. There are other opportunities that we could potentially put those retired armed forces members into to transition their career.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For our last five minutes with this panel, we have Mr. d'Entremont.

[*Translation*]

Chris d'Entremont: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

I will be sharing the last couple of minutes of my time with Ms. Hirtle.

My first comment is for Mr. Gareau.

Thank you for your service and your continued service as a reservist.

If you're running a business and doing some reservist work, what do you do in your spare time? Is it all kinds of things?

Dustin Gareau: Honestly, every minute I have, I spend with my wife and my two children.

Chris d'Entremont: Thank you for that. I know you're a very busy person, and I really appreciate that you're here today.

If you ever want to set up a business in Nova Scotia, we need lots of electricians there too. Yours is one of those services that I think many of our communities really need.

My questions may go to IBEW in this round.

We've heard a lot in the presentations—previously, today and, of course, on Monday—that especially in transition, veterans are looking for networking, pathways and access to entrepreneurship within Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Dyck, there have been a lot of investments by VAC into...I think we had some in the brotherhood-affiliated groups, like the Western Joint Electrical Training Society and the National Electrical Trade Council. There was something like \$10 million and \$3.6 million, so there has been some support going to some of your organizations.

How important is it to continue that to try to support veterans in their transitions?

Brandon Dyck: It's extremely important. As I mentioned before, that money.... We also put in our own resources. We have our own trainers and our own facilities. We take those dollars and we specifically target equity-seeking groups to attract women into the trades and young indigenous people in areas where they maybe haven't had those opportunities. I think we could absolutely do that for veterans as well.

Chris d'Entremont: We hear quite often about red tape reduction. It's complicated in a lot of cases, and especially in those transitions. How have IBEW and your affiliates been able to make some of this easy? Maybe Mr. Gareau can comment on how easy it was to do two things at the same time.

Dustin Gareau: I'd say there's a lot of red tape to anything in business. I would need more experience in hiring more full-time people who aren't already in the union to be able to answer that effectively.

Brandon Dyck: When it comes to recruitment, I think we can provide contractors with the workforce we already have. In a lot of areas of the country, they're sitting there, waiting for work. The reason for our work lists is to ensure that everybody gets a fair opportunity without skipping the line per se.

Again, we still want to provide those equity-seeking groups with the opportunities that weren't there in the past. We will make exceptions to share, especially in those rural areas, where I think we're going to have a lot of members who are missing out.

• (1825)

Chris d'Entremont: Thank you.

I'll give the rest of my time to Ms. Hirtle.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you very much.

I'm from Nova Scotia, like my colleague. A few years ago, the Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Agency started the blue seal, which is for individuals who have the Red Seal designation to learn business management skills. It's a partnership with the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration and different service providers.

I'm wondering if your organization offers something of that nature. If not, would it be of value to look at that across the country?

Brandon Dyck: We'd like expand the programs that we do offer, like Helmets to Hardhats. We've solely partnered with them for our veterans intake at this point, so, in answer to your question, at this point no, but we would be excited to do so.

Alana Hirtle: I know it would be of value. Do you find that many of the individuals coming in, perhaps as veterans, have any of those business management skills? Are there transferable skills from the military that you're able to apply?

Brandon Dyck: The leadership skills that veterans bring to the union are where their entrepreneurial skills are rooted. We could definitely harness that. Once they have the technical skills, they would prosper within the union because of that.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you.

The Chair: This concludes our time for questions.

I want to say, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much for joining us today.

Mr. Gareau, thank you for your service. I can appreciate how busy you are.

[*Translation*]

I want to mention to the committee that our next meeting will be on February 9, 2026. From 11 a.m. to 12 p.m., we will resume the study on barriers to entrepreneurship among veterans. I can confirm that, from 12 p.m. to 12:30 p.m., we will have our in camera briefing with the Lithuanian chair of the Canada-Lithuania Friendship Group. The Lithuanian ambassador to Canada will also be attending that meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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