



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 023

Wednesday, February 25, 2026

Chair: Marie-France Lalonde



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Wednesday, February 25, 2026

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

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

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format, pursuant to the House of Commons Standing Orders. Members can participate in person or remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

Before we continue, I would ask that all in-person participants consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio 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, which links to a short awareness video.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and our 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 choose the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

For members participating in person, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. I don't think there are any members participating via Zoom.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

We have, as an individual, Mr. Bryan Brulotte.

[*English*]

From the Honour House Society, by video conference, we have Mr. Richard Coleman, director. From Veterans Elite Drone Training Services Inc., we have Mr. Greg Merrill, remotely piloted aircraft system instructor and flight reviewer, also by video conference.

I want to thank you for joining us today.

You will each have five minutes to give your opening remarks, and then we will proceed to a series of questions with the members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

I invite Mr. Brulotte to go first. You have the floor for five minutes.

Bryan Brulotte (As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members.

[*English*]

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It's a privilege to be invited as a witness on an issue that matters deeply to me, both professionally and personally, which is how Canada can better support veterans who wish to become entrepreneurs.

[*Translation*]

I will make my remarks in English, but I will be very happy to answer questions in the language of Molière or Shakespeare.

• (1635)

[*English*]

By way of background, I'm a former infantry officer of the Canadian Army, having served both in the regular army and in the primary reserve for over 42 years. My military service shaped my leadership style, my tolerance for risk and my understanding of responsibility and mission focus. Like many veterans, I transitioned from a highly structured institution into civilian life, where those attributes were valuable but were not always translated or recognized.

Academically, I'm a graduate of the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean. I pursued postgraduate studies that emphasized leadership, organizational management and execution under pressure. That included an M.B.A. and a doctorate in business.

Professionally, after leaving full-time military service and concurrent to my service in the army reserve, I went on to build and lead one of Canada's largest staffing and workforce solution firms. At its peak, my company, MaxSyS, employed approximately 3,000 employees and generated close to \$100 million in annualized revenue across 14 offices from Vancouver to Halifax. I was the sole owner. MaxSyS operated nationally across Canada, and it served clients in highly regulated environments in the public and private sectors.

I share this not as a personal résumé exercise, but to establish that, over 30 years in business, I've lived the full arc of what many veterans aspire to do: transition, entrepreneurship, growth and scale. I've seen where the system works and, more importantly, where it does not.

Based on that experience, I'd like to offer four concrete recommendations to the committee.

The first is structured, transition-oriented business training. Veterans possess many of the raw attributes required for entrepreneurship: discipline, resilience, decision-making under uncertainty, and leadership. What they often lack is targeted business literacy at the moment of transition—not generic entrepreneurship seminars, but practical, applied training focused on fundamentals such as cash flow management, corporate structuring, regulatory compliance, procurement and risk management. This training should be offered ideally before release, and it should recognize prior military leadership experience, rather than treating veterans as novice professionals starting from zero.

My second recommendation is for formalized networking and peer-based support ecosystems. Entrepreneurship is not an individual sport. Access to trusted networks is often the single greatest predictor of success. Veterans benefit enormously from peer communities that understand both military culture and commercial reality. Governments can play a catalytic role by supporting veteran-led business networks, mentorship programs and peer advisory groups, and by connecting new entrepreneurs with experienced operators, investors and professional service providers. The goal is not dependency; it's accelerated learning and reduced isolation.

The third recommendation is regarding procurement access and early customer validation. One of the hardest challenges for any new business is securing its first credible customer. Veterans are often well suited to government contracting environments, yet they find procurement systems opaque and inaccessible. Targeted procurement pathways, pilot programs or set-asides that allow veteran-owned businesses to compete fairly and transparently can provide validation without compromising value for money or competition principles.

The fourth and last recommendation, most critically, is about access to growth and scale capital. This final point is not unique to veterans, but it's essential that the committee hear it. Canada has a systemic problem when it comes to scaling successful mid-sized companies internationally. My ambition was to scale MaxSyS internationally. In my own case, despite having thousands of employees, strong revenues and a proven operating model, I found it extraordinarily difficult to secure financing to expand overseas. Domestic banks were conservative, and export-oriented capital was limited.

Growth capital for companies beyond start-up but below the multinational scale was simply not available in a meaningful way. This is why I sold MaxSyS, in August 2024, for \$20 million.

For veteran entrepreneurs who succeed domestically, this becomes a ceiling. We encourage ambition, but we do not provide the financial infrastructure to support it. If Canada is serious about building globally competitive companies, including those founded by veterans, then access to scale capital must be addressed as a policy issue.

Thank you for your time, and I welcome your questions.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brulotte. I also want to thank you for your service to the country.

[*English*]

I will now invite, from Veterans Elite Drone Training Services Inc., Mr. Greg Merrill, remotely piloted aircraft system instructor and flight reviewer, to speak for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Greg Merrill (Remotely Piloted Aircraft System Instructor and Flight Reviewer, Veterans Elite Drone Training Services Inc.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

I'm a retired air force officer and aerospace engineer. I spent 27 years in the regular force and some time after that in the supplementary reserves. Following my time in the regular force, I transitioned to industry, where I worked in the nuclear industry for several years, later on forming businesses of my own.

My reason for being here today is regarding the ever-expanding world of drones—the industry itself, its applicability to veterans and the training opportunities that VEdTS offers. VEdTS was formed about three years ago to offer training to vets that could be accessed, or at least would have funding access, through the funding programs for both the short course and the formal program funding.

In March 2023, VAC made an unexplained policy change to allow only short course funding to apply to drone training. Drones are also known as RPAS, which is remotely piloted aircraft system. We'll continue to use the name "drone" just for simplicity here.

That began to limit the availability of the expansion of qualifications for veterans undertaking drone training, because the certifications required through Transport Canada require, in some cases, formal training. That can burn up the \$5,000 pot that's available through short course funding in a very short period of time.

Some of the industries that drones are used in now.... We see them in cinematography. People see drone shows at various public events. What they don't see are areas such as photogrammetry, where 2-D images are taken from the air to form 3-D images. These are used in geophysical surveys, water resource management, agriculture and accident site reconstruction. Thermal imaging is used by law enforcement and also search and rescue to detect, in this case, the temperature differential of a warm body or live body—pardon the term—out where someone could be lost and the forces that be are trying to locate them. That can be done remotely from several miles away by a single operator.

Veterans are ideally suited for this vocation, for some of the reasons our previous witness mentioned. They're focused. They have a nature of ingrained self-discipline. They spent a career where training is prevalent throughout. As an instructor, I've even had experience with students diagnosed with PTSD who have found the focus and skill set development of drone operations to be very therapeutic.

VedTS has a bona fide, Transport Canada-approved RPAS training facility. It has trained over 350 veterans to date and employs over 50 instructors, including myself, across Canada. A good portion of those individuals have gone on to form their own businesses. However, the training in the advanced areas that I was mentioning puts a ceiling on their ability to undergo that and to be employable.

The final summation comment I can make is that these are not toys. They're highly complex devices that require extensive training to be utilized. The potential is growing all the time. The surface is only being scratched.

Our objective is to have the approved eligibility list for the education and training benefit under the formal training program funding for drone-related training.

Thank you.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Merrill. Thank you for your service, sir.

We will now pass the floor to Mr. Coleman.

I understand, Mr. Coleman, that we had some technical difficulty with your sound. Before you start, could you just tell us a little bit about the weather? We'll make sure that everybody is okay here.

Richard Coleman (Director, Honour House Society): Absolutely.

The weather in the Vancouver area right now is about 14°C. There was sun this morning. It's a bit cloudy this afternoon and quite pleasant.

The Chair: I will not ask you to repeat the weather, because I got some very negative outbursts of comments in this room. Apparently I'm being blamed. I don't want to take that responsibility.

We still have a bit of a problem. Let's try again. Could you say a few extra words so we can hear you better?

Richard Coleman: I am presently in a building called Honour House in New Westminster, British Columbia, which has given 19,000 free bed nights to veterans, service people and first responders coming to Vancouver to get treatment for PTSD, any medical appointment or anything their family needs. It is a very beautiful home, and it is a place of safety and security for those folks coming to Vancouver.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Coleman, I'll invite you to start. We may have to interrupt you if we are not getting proper translation during your speech. I have to apologize in advance, sir, if that happens. I may regretfully interrupt your speech with us this afternoon.

You can start. Take your time, sir.

Richard Coleman: My name is Rich Coleman. I am a businessman. I was in the naval reserves in my youth, and the RCMP after that. I started a number of successful businesses. I went into public life in 1996 for 24 and a half years. I am the former deputy premier of the Province of British Columbia. One of my passions is helping young people get into business or helping them—for free—turn their businesses around.

The traits of a business leader are very important. Ironically, they align very much with Canadian Armed Forces training. Many business owners fail to succeed because they don't have the discipline or the organization. I have worked with armed forces members to help start businesses for them. They come with something you don't even find in a regular employment environment. From their training as members of the armed forces, they come with teamwork and personal responsibility. They can show up on time. They know operation and management of equipment. They understand inventory control from their very first day, simply because they are responsible for their personal kit. They have mental health and fitness.

With these basics, members of the forces need to transition to additional skills as they come out of the forces in order to be successful in business. This is where the armed forces could step up by giving them an understanding of financial reporting: the revenue and expense portions of running a business. There's no training or education that I'm aware of that helps those young men and women coming out of the forces do that. That would be one of my recommendations.

The second thing is that they need knowledge of the opportunities that are in front of them. This is not just for members of the armed forces. Young people looking to go into business tend to think there are only traditional businesses out there for them to get into and be successful at. In my experience—having worked with armed forces members who have gone into business—they are adaptable and can learn about different opportunities within the business environment.

To achieve the ability to seek out a successful business in Canada, you need to create an environment for success for these people as they come out of the armed forces. Business is no easy road. There are a number of stressors that come with owning and operating a business, and starting on your own is a daunting task.

Members need a number of things. First of all, they need to sit down with somebody to build a business plan so they can articulate their market, their objectives for building revenue and, in turn, how they can deliver on those objectives to somebody who might want to invest in their business.

One of the previous speakers brought up the issue of capital, which is obviously a requirement and also a hindrance for people getting into business today. What I have found is that the best thing to do with people with discipline, organization and a business plan is to sit them down with private investors who will look at things and be prepared to take a risk on an opportunity with somebody new. It's part of their mandate, as business owners, to go out and help these people.

Mentorship is very critical to starting a business. I've mentored a number of businesspeople over the years. The beauty of mentorship tied to a member is that they have the opportunity to sit down, talk about their frustrations, and talk about what's working and what's not working with somebody who has experience with mentorship. I think you will find that if you put a mentorship program in the Canadian Armed Forces, in co-operation with Canadian businesses, you will have a number of businesspeople who'd be happy to give them their time—to sit down and help them work through their business plans in order to be successful.

The accessible ear of an expert is an invaluable asset for a new business owner. The Canadian Armed Forces should think about having a mentorship program, if they don't already, in order to coach those who are looking to enter business. Currently, to achieve that relationship, I think you will find—I know this from my own colleagues in business, over the years—that they're really quite happy to sit down and help young businesspeople if asked to. Members of the armed forces.... Given how much people believe those who serve our country should have a hand, I believe they would step up.

The other thing the armed forces should consider is having a relationship with the major franchise opportunities in Canada. Have an agreement with them to look at our people to see whether they'd be good as franchise owners, because franchise owners are more successful in business, by percentage, than those just starting out on their own. That's because they come with the discipline and management that's required. The people coming from the armed forces have those skills as well.

• (1645)

I have direct experience with a young man in business who served in Afghanistan. I think the biggest thing for him and others I've dealt with is that they need to have a sounding board. It's not just about the mentorship. They really need to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone. You'd be surprised how their stressors will come into play and they just need to talk to somebody. Sometimes, the stress is not exactly because of the business, but they just need to talk through something that gets them to the issue for their business. You'll find that really affects their ability to handle the volatility of their operation. Because they've come from a business environment, when they get to focus back on the business, their success is much higher.

For those described persons, I would take a call many times as a listening ear. If you look at how you can help them in this way, as I described, I think you'll find we will have a lot of successful young business people coming out of the armed forces.

Thank you.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Coleman. We appreciate your comments.

Now we will start a round of questions. Each member will have six minutes for the first round.

We'll start with Mr. Tolmie for six minutes.

Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for your testimonies and your service, and for spending your time coming here today and sharing your insights with this committee.

We've been flipping back and forth recently between the PCVRS contract and this entrepreneurial study. Sometimes we feel like we're losing a bit of traction.

Something that was brought up in the last meeting was the U.S.'s vision or the way they treat their veterans in terms of social mobility. I want to touch on that with the witnesses here.

Here's what I'd like to start with. The United States treats military service as a foundation for social mobility. The GI bill, the boots to business program and the 3% federal contracting set-aside all reflect a deliberate policy choice that service should open economic doors, not close them. Veterans are seen as proven leaders, disciplined operators and credible entrepreneurs worthy of investment.

Mr. Brulotte, when you stated your four recommendations, you touched on this. In Canada, we're studying barriers to veteran entrepreneurship, while the \$6.6-billion defence industrial strategy excludes the very people who served in the sector it's meant to build. What does that omission say about how Canada values military service as a pathway to economic opportunity?

Bryan Brulotte: I'm not sure I have a quick answer to that.

Fraser Tolmie: I have six minutes.

The Chair: You have four minutes.

Bryan Brulotte: I don't know if I have a long answer, either.

I think there is definitely value. I mentioned in recommendation number three that you can have opportunities for procurement access, very much as we have in set-asides or technical point systems. When you're looking at evaluating different bidders, you can use prior service as a technical criterion by which you can then increase or raise the value of a certain bid versus another one—as long as that's transparent and clear across the board. That will not only allow veterans to bid on projects, but also provide an incentive for other companies that perhaps have no veterans to bring veterans on board so they can bid on the contract. Very much like the aboriginal set-aside does, this would do the same.

Fraser Tolmie: Thank you. That's a very well-thought-out answer.

Mr. Merrill, I'm very intrigued by your testimony. I'll try to give you a short question, because I know you have a dry throat.

You're training veterans who then go on to found their own drone business services. They're opening up their own businesses. What is the single biggest non-skills barrier they face after completing training, and what would the federal government need to do to remove it?

Greg Merrill: In the industry, for drones, the training we offer currently gives them certification level to operate—I won't say, to operate as commercial operators, because there is actually no commercial rating. It is what's called an advanced level certificate that allows drones or RPAS to be operated in areas normally restricted for those who, for lack of a better explanation, are more recreational operators. It is the advanced training at that level that deals with some of the fields I was mentioning, like photogrammetry and videography. I'm not talking about regular recreational videography. It's manipulation of the data, but also the techniques used to acquire the appropriate data in drone operations.

There's a system called "lidar" that's coming into play. You've heard of radar, which stands for "radio detection and ranging". Lidar is "light detection and ranging", a similar system but light-based. It is used massively for inspections of windmills, volumetric assessments and structural bridge inspections. As an engineer, I could go on and give you a considerable number of examples.

The issue is that training in these areas is expensive, and it currently exceeds what is available through the VAC envelope under the short course program funding, which is a one-time maximum of \$5,000. It was not always like that. In 2023, drone training was eligible under the formal program envelope. For veterans like me, that didn't mean they were going to hand out the money to you indiscriminately, but you would have access of up to \$80,000, I believe, if you were a former career member of the forces. That was changed suddenly and arbitrarily without explanation. I don't know if you have a copy of the letter I wrote, but it said that, moving forward, all drone training would be funded only by short course funding. As I mentioned, that \$5,000 pot gets burned up very quickly.

As I pointed out earlier, when you're trying to start a business, you look at the commercial side of things, like banks, supports.... I'm a former entrepreneur with a business as well. I know what the uphill battle is like in dealing with financial institutions to try to get funding when you have a bona fide business plan.

• (1655)

The Chair: Mr. Merrill, unfortunately, I have to interrupt you. I apologize sincerely. I'm sure we can come back to that.

I apologize, sir.

Greg Merrill: That's okay.

The Chair: We will now have, for six minutes, Mrs. Hirtle.

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

I'm going to continue with Mr. Merrill.

Thank you for being here today and for your service.

Greg Merrill: Thank you.

Alana Hirtle: You were talking about the \$5,000 short course training fund, and then there was an \$80,000 one. Where would your training fall within that range of funds?

Greg Merrill: Several years ago, when I first applied to get my advanced certification as a drone operator, the training program itself cost \$5,000. I submitted an application under short course funding, because that was the amount they had available for it. I had no idea that I might qualify for a formal course. Following that submission, VAC contacted me and said that I should really put that under formal course funding. Part of the concern was that I would be out of pocket, but they said that once you use that short course funding, it's gone and you can't have access to it anymore. That was the way that initial certification for me took place in 2022.

It was a year later, when I was putting in an application for more advanced training—that coursework was in the neighbourhood of \$20,000—that VAC sat on it for several months and then came back with a decision saying, “No, we're not doing this anymore.” Since then, it has been limited for any veteran who wants to apply to that short course envelope.

To add to your question, conceivably, as this industry is currently expanding and these devices are becoming more complex—these are not toys that are being funded; they have many applications inside and outside of the regular business world, as the world has seen—that training cost will tend to increase because of the training level the instructors have to acquire before they can take it on. I don't think it would ever burn up the entire envelope of \$80,000, but it could certainly use a good portion of it.

Alana Hirtle: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

Let's talk a little bit about those training programs then, please. Can you describe what the training programs typically cover and how they prepare participants for commercial opportunities?

Greg Merrill: The very first level of certification for drone operations is called “basic”, and that is for someone who wants to get a drone to play with more for fun, etc. There's a minimum age limit of 14 for that, I believe, but you're very limited as to where you can actually operate them.

The one area that must be negotiated if you are conducting a drone operation is if the area is considered restricted, maybe due to a police operation, or if it's controlled airspace, where you could impact air operations. In order to function in those zones, you must have at least an advanced limit certification. An advanced limit certification allows you to function in controlled airspace. If the aircraft meets the criteria, it can be over people. Transport Canada has very strict guidelines on how these are to be operated. They're also limited to what's called “visual line of sight”, or VLOS.

With the increasing requirement to operate at an extended range with drones, they have recently introduced what's called the level 1 complex rating. That permits you, under given conditions, if they're all approved by Transport Canada, to run at what's known as “beyond visual line of sight”. That's where you are remotely operating a drone beyond your line of sight at a point that it's so far away you can't see it and you're relying entirely on the operating system, the machine's camera and its GPS data to let you know exactly where it is and what it is doing.

Those last two—advanced and level 1—are the ones that are required if you wish to operate as a commercial operator.

• (1700)

Alana Hirtle: Wow, I feel like I got all of that. That was amazing. Thank you.

Are those the certifications they will receive from your training?

Greg Merrill: Yes.

Alana Hirtle: Okay, that's great.

Have you observed strengths that veterans bring to the RPAS training and the broader drone industry? Can you talk about those a little bit?

Greg Merrill: Actually, those strengths have also been mentioned by the two other witnesses here, including the fact that for members of the forces training is inherent throughout their careers. Your ability to focus, self-discipline, the teamwork aspect, all of those things combine into that motivation to get the job done and do it well. Assimilating vast amounts of information in very short periods of time and being able to not just regurgitate it but apply it and rationalize with it are skill sets that contribute to making someone an effective operator.

There is the technical aspect of it, as well. Most of the individuals who come into drone training usually have some degree of technical training from the military.

Alana Hirtle: Okay, I have 30 seconds.

Quickly, are there practical adjustments or alternatives that you believe could support both VAC's goals and veterans seeking advanced training?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Greg Merrill: In terms of alternatives, right now drone schools are being developed because these types of programs are not available through regular educational institutions, such as community colleges, or if they are, they are just beginning to start up. It is independent operations that have been focusing on the nitty-gritty of this industry.

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

[Translation]

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

[English]

For those on the call who aren't francophone, Madame Gaudreau will address you in French, so make sure you have the right button on your system pressed so you can hear her properly.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

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

Mr. Brulotte, we can see the exceptional quality of your work in terms of structure and implementation. You've had great success in your business, which you've sold.

In a few words, what are the four elements we're talking about? Can you briefly define them?

Are there some that are more important than others?

Bryan Brulotte: There are four things that helped me develop a national business. First is an unwavering ambition. In everything I did, whether in the military, the military college, the regiment or in business, I always tried to push myself and do all I could.

Second is a high capacity to withstand and manage stress. I understood how to compartmentalize different elements during crises to make sure we still had a plan to keep moving forward.

Third is the technical knowledge I acquired in accounting, finance, human resources management, statistics and business analysis, among others. I was lucky. When I left the Canadian Armed Forces, I was doing a master's in business administration, or MBA, and that knowledge helped me a lot.

Fourth is luck. I say that in all honesty. From time to time, you have to be in the right place at the right time.

• (1705)

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I understand you already had that ambition before joining the forces. I'm trying to draw a link with the potential cultural shock for those who may not have thought about becoming an entrepreneur. There are some similarities. I am the co-owner of two franchised businesses. There's something we have within us right from the beginning.

How can that be a deterrent or, to the contrary, a driver?

Bryan Brulotte: People ask me why I went into business. The truth is I was desperate. I had nothing else to fall back on.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You say you were desperate. Can you clarify that?

Bryan Brulotte: I left the forces to become chief of staff for a federal minister. I had been aide-de-camp for the Governor General, and then I joined the regiment. In 1993, Ms. Campbell became prime minister. I left the regiment to become chief of staff, and six months later, what I thought might be a career turned into a summer job.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Bryan Brulotte: No one was going to hire me in Ottawa, because I was a Conservative, but the city was different. I started making 100 calls a day from my basement. I had two suits: a grey suit and a blue suit. On Monday, I'd wear my blue suit. On Tuesday, I'd wear my grey suit. On Wednesdays, I'd wear the grey jacket with the blue pants, and so on. I was going door-to-door.

At that time, there was the Yellow Pages for the government. I'd start at the letter a and make calls. After 100 calls, I'd go into the city, find free parking, since I had no money, and go door-to-door. I

did that for three years. In my first year, I signed \$2 million worth in contracts. I had ambition, and I was desperate.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: You're certainly not the only one in the forces to have ambition, discipline and leadership, and you have to accept hierarchy. There are a lot of links to be made with entrepreneurship, such as the ability to face adversity and turn on a dime. Obviously, it's a bit like that in politics as well.

How is it that some people can't have access to procurement, capital, training and so on, when all we want to do is honour them and support them?

Since you're familiar with politics, why do you think these links aren't recognized, and why are we having trouble providing veterans with what would enable them to live with the dignity they deserve?

Bryan Brulotte: For the last few years, the narrative has been that veterans are broken, that they all have post-traumatic stress disorder, that they have mental health issues, and so on.

We were comparing earlier what we have in Canada to what is offered in the U.S. Well, you should know that the national and political narrative is completely different there. Go to the Government of Canada's website. All you see are programs for broken and injured vets. There's nothing about their incredible potential. That's what we should do.

The Chair: I totally agree, Mr. Brulotte. I'm sorry to interrupt.

Thank you very much.

[English]

We're now in the second round.

Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes.

Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

Mr. Brulotte, I think we'll carry on there. That was precisely where I was hoping to go as well.

Do you have a recommendation on how to turn that around? I think the G.I. bill in the United States has been effective. Are you suggesting something like that?

• (1710)

Bryan Brulotte: I want to choose my words carefully. The narrative we have in terms of our relationship with veterans in Canada has always been one of compassion and thankfulness. That is proper, and it is one of the elements we should be pursuing. It's easy to go down this road of compassion, but when we continue to go down that road, we tend to emphasize things we want to be compassionate about. That is helping veterans who are broken, who are wounded or who have PTSD, and of course that is something that has to be done.

However, what's happened as well is that it has overshadowed... It's the narrative that's constantly pursued, instead of saying, "Oh, my God, look at this workforce of leaders who have tenacity, perseverance and ambition and who've served in very difficult circumstances." If they can act under fire, they can probably take it when they're trying to do a sales call and need to get out there and grow some business.

We've gone away from that. We do not have that anywhere. If you scrub the web, you won't find it. We have to get back to that. What we have to get into is that narrative.

Arnold Viersen: Mr. Merrill, you talked about the training for drone operators. I assume that the military has drone operators. Could you correct me on that? If that's the case, does that certification transfer across the military-civilian line?

Greg Merrill: Not to my knowledge.... In all honesty, I'm not sure what we actually have for drones in the Canadian military right now. You do hear about drones being used for military operations currently between Ukraine and Russia. Any device can be weaponized. In the case of drones, in the United States or the ones they operate in Europe that can be controlled from the U.S. continent, those individuals undergo.... It's an entirely different realm of training, because you're talking about a very different realm of control systems for them.

As far as I know, there is no available certification in the military that would cross over to a Transport Canada drone operator compliance level.

Arnold Viersen: In the skilled trades, I'm a Red Seal auto mechanic. I can take that clear across the country. Every province will recognize it. However, I understand that this is not the case for the military. If you come out of the military and you were in one of the skilled trades, you don't necessarily have a Red Seal trade certificate. Do you know anything about that?

Greg Merrill: As an aerospace engineering officer, I would have airframe technicians, aero-engine technicians, instrument and electrical technicians, and safety systems technicians working for me. There was a time when those trades did not cross over to a level of civilian equivalence as a civilian aircraft maintenance engineer, or an AME. Those are the individuals who work on everything from small general aircraft right up to what Air Canada flies.

I don't know the exact crossover, but over the better part of the 20 years that I have been out of the military, credibility has been established for the training that has been received in the military, and it either becomes equivalent to or condenses or shortens the amount of additional training required for someone to acquire their civilian certifications.

Arnold Viersen: I represent large agricultural communities, and there's lots of excitement around drone technology in agriculture. The frustrations are around how long it takes the government to get organized in allowing this technology to be used. They bring this technology from other countries where it's being used, and it gets shut down very quickly. The government says it doesn't have this regulation in place, or they can't do that, like the line of sight or having multiple drones flying with one operator. All of these things are causing frustrations.

Do you have any comments around that?

The Chair: You have five seconds.

Greg Merrill: Okay.

Those things are changing. Transport Canada has been updating the regulations almost on an annual basis, and it does have provisions for multiple drones and for beyond line of sight now.

• (1715)

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

I apologize again.

Greg Merrill: That's no problem.

The Chair: Mr. Casey, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for being here, and thank you for your service.

I would like to bring Mr. Coleman into the conversation.

Mr. Coleman, when I say "Thank you for your service," that includes your service as a police officer and as an elected public servant.

The Chair: Mr. Coleman has disappeared from my screen.

Sean Casey: Oh my, and I just gave him all those compliments.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Fraser Tolmie: I'll take them.

Sean Casey: Shall I start again from the top, Madam Chair?

The Chair: He disappeared about 15 seconds ago, so we will reconnect.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Let's take a little break.

The Chair: We'll just suspend for a minute to see if we can reconnect.

• (1715)

(Pause)

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We're having some technical issues. I will therefore give the floor to Ms. Gaudreau for two and a half minutes.

Then we'll come back to Mr. Casey for five minutes.

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

We want to learn from this study. We want to target what we can fix.

Mr. Brulotte, your comments on labels or stigmatization are very interesting. There was talk of looking at things differently. I get the feeling there are gains to be made when we realize all the potential people have and use it to our advantage. There's also the pride of being a hero.

That's what I'm noticing from the presentations we're hearing. It's good to see the other side. I would invite you to share your comments or other arguments with us. We have people here taking notes.

Of the four measures that are important to you, which one would be the most important?

Bryan Brulotte: Among the four measures we talked about, it would be to adopt a positive narrative. It gives people the impression that they can accomplish something. They have more confidence in themselves. Furthermore, people in general will realize their own potential. When they go to the bank, let's say to get capital to do business—

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: They won't be afraid of that.

Bryan Brulotte: That's correct. Veterans are not broken. They don't have mental health issues. They're not violent in a workplace. These are very important things.

There are a number of things we could do, but if we wanted to focus on just one, it would be to adopt a much more positive and ambitious narrative when it comes to veterans and entrepreneurship.

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

Thank you, Mr. Brulotte.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

• (1720)

[English]

Now we will invite Mr. Casey for five minutes, to address Mr. Coleman.

Sean Casey: Mr. Coleman, welcome back. Thank you for your service in the military and the police and to the good people of British Columbia in elected life.

Sir, I want to just come back to a few things that you said and afford you an opportunity to expand upon them.

One of the things you talked about was the value of the franchise model to somebody with a military background. If I understood you correctly, you said that every franchise model comes with a pretty comprehensive manual and that military training is ideally suited for that sort of environment. Could you just expand upon that a bit? Are there examples of franchisors who are already doing this? Are there examples that you've seen in what you're doing now where you've had an opportunity to substantiate your treatise that this is a good match?

Richard Coleman: First of all, we should understand that most new businesses fail at a higher percentage than franchise businesses do in Canada. That's because the tried-and-true model of the marketing, the advertising campaign and the discipline in how the business is run is already written up for the person who's going into the business.

I say to people that we'll take a look at an oil change business, for example, and we'll look at a franchise agreement. If you want to be on your own, this is the type of model you should seek out if you don't want to franchise. The franchising piece is basically this: You know what you need to put up; you know what you get for service;

and you know you have somebody to support you in the marketing of the business. If you're a person with discipline who can follow the rules in a franchise, like a member of the military who has the training in being disciplined, is on time and is prepared to work hard—because any franchise or any business is a lot of work—a franchise opportunity is much more ideally suited to you, and to most people, to enter into your first business.

Having said that, it would be beneficial if the Canadian Franchise Association, which has trade shows on franchising and what have you, was in a relationship with the Canadian Armed Forces and said, “Look, we have all of these different franchises. We know which ones are successful.” It could be a food service. It could be an automotive service. They franchise just about everything today in some way or another. You can learn an awful lot from it. If you had that relationship, you could ask, “Would you take the time to give us, as the military, a franchise show at our bases to show our veterans who will be moving on what the opportunities are in business through a franchise?”

They're easier to finance. You can actually attract investors to it, because they see the discipline as well. It can work very well.

Sean Casey: You also mentioned the value of mentorship, and that's something we've heard from several of our guests over the course of this study, including Dr. Brulotte today.

I can tell you that where I come from, in Prince Edward Island, we have something through the chamber of commerce for new immigrants called the connectors program.

Could you talk a bit about what a formalized mentorship program would look like for veterans? What would be the key elements of that?

Richard Coleman: You have a remarkable resource out there. There are people who have served in the military who I think would be glad to mentor a new business entrant simply because of their relationship with the military. You have the same thing happening with other things, like law enforcement. We all want to give back. Most of us want to give back to business or what have you. To give back means you start a mentorship program and ask if people would be prepared to mentor.

I don't charge any fees for anybody I mentor. I give them the time, because I believe they need to have the opportunity and somebody to talk to. That mentorship can be the simplest little thing about where you can access parts or whatever. They ask, “How could I find this thing?” You can make a few phone calls if you've been around in the business world and get that answer for a new business person who's seeking it out.

It's really about saying, “Why don't we start a mentorship program?” You could liken it, if you want, to examples like Big Brothers Big Sisters, where somebody mentors a child, brings them along and gives them some help in their life to be successful. It's no different.

The people I know—I have a number of folks to whom I will send people to get advice—really enjoy sitting down with a young, disciplined business person, whether they be military or non-military, and sharing some of their successes or information to help them be successful. You could have a program like that too.

• (1725)

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

This concludes our first round.

I want to say thanks to all of our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

I thank them for their service to our country.

[*English*]

Before we start round two, I would like to read a motion to adopt from our subcommittee. I will make sure that I read it properly.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to ask the committee whether it is ready to adopt the second report of our Subcommittee on Agenda and Procedure. This report was distributed to committee members earlier today.

Is it the will of the committee to adopt this report?

(Report adopted [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

[*English*]

Sean Casey: Thank you.

That's very helpful.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll suspend. Then we'll have our second panel.

Once again, thank you to all the witnesses who took part in the meeting in the first hour.

• (1725)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1730)

[*English*]

The Chair: Welcome, everyone.

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

[*Translation*]

It's a pleasure to have you here.

[*English*]

One reminder is to please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those of you in the room, please use interpretation. You can use the earpiece and select the desired channel using the device in front of you.

Another reminder is that all comments should be addressed through the chair. I am the clock keeper. That means I may have to interrupt you, so I apologize in advance.

On behalf of our committee, I would like to welcome, as an individual, Mr. Kevin Leboeuf. Also as an individual, we have Mr. Grigori Potapenko. From the Veterans Artist Collective, we have Mr. Christopher Hennebery, chief warrant officer.

Thank you to you all for your service.

We will be starting a round of five minutes with opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Leboeuf, you have the floor for five minutes.

Kevin Leboeuf (As an Individual): Madam Chair, members of the committee, it's an honour to be with you this evening to share my story.

[*English*]

I never thought that getting shot at or mortared, taking cover or getting blown up by an IED would ever lead to becoming an entrepreneur. As soldiers, we have to make quick decisions that are necessary for the survival of self and of our section. Those decision-making skills are not taught. They're lived. They're experienced. They are forged in moments when hesitation can cost lives.

My name is Kevin Leboeuf, co-founder of Educated Beards, a 100% natural and organic grooming product company, and 9bark-media, a full-funnel marketing agency.

In 2016, I was diagnosed with PTSD from my 2008–09 mission in Afghanistan, where I was out of the wire daily, searching for bombs and threats. When I was medically released from the Canadian Armed Forces, I lost all purpose. The army was the only thing I knew, and suddenly I no longer had it. I hadn't even finished high school. Self-doubt, fear and worry set in. Suicidal thoughts, ongoing therapy, body aches, trouble sleeping and anxiety.... It's incredibly hard to find a new purpose, a new identity or a new start when everything you knew has been stripped away.

When I got out, I decided to grow a beard for the first time in my life: yay, a freedom beard. It was awful. It was itchy, dry, flaky—many of the symptoms men experience when they don't know how to take care of their beard. Before giving up, I bought products at the pharmacy and brought them home. My partner in life and in business, Alicia Phillips, has a background in holistic science. She rejected the products immediately because they were full of toxic chemicals. She started making products for me. Friends wanted some, and then friends of friends. That is how Educated Beards was born. Today, we supply multiple countries and hold one of the highest certifications in the world.

What surprised me the most was that taking care of my physical appearance had a massive impact on my mental health. I became less suicidal. The whole thing clicked. I was learning self-care. I had a routine again. I had a mission again. That routine, that structure and that daily discipline gave me purpose when I had none. It would not have been possible to start my business without Alicia. During my transition, we thought that being a veteran would be a great asset; instead, we learned that it was not. We had to restructure our shareholders' agreement. Alicia became the majority shareholder, because women in business had access to benefits, funding opportunities, training, networking and expert support that were simply not available to veterans. Starting a business is hard for anyone, but it became very clear that starting a business as a veteran was an even steeper uphill battle.

From the outside looking in, everything appears great. I was labelled as a successful entrepreneur. In 2023, I was named veteran entrepreneur of the year by Prince's Trust Canada. I had not participated in any of their programs, yet I became a spokesperson of sorts. They brought me to speak at charity events in New York City in front of global celebrities.

Shortly thereafter, Manulife investigated me. They asked for company financials, which showed a loss. I've never taken a salary and have put everything into Educated Beards. My psychologist had clearly stated that a return to work was not advised due to the severity and persistence of my symptoms. That was disregarded, and my benefits were cut off.

These were some of the reasons cited: I'm the co-owner of a company operating in thousands of locations across multiple countries, and I have been a keynote speaker, even earning a best speaker award at a small Fredericton Toastmasters Club. The club met twice a month. It was part of rebuilding my confidence. Because it was used against me, I have not gone back since. I was made to feel ashamed, as if being a disabled veteran means I should sit at home and do nothing.

I feel used. When it's convenient for national organizations to showcase a broken veteran succeeding, it serves their narrative, but when the reality of PTSD—the therapy, the panic, the setbacks—does not fit that narrative, it is ignored or punished.

Veterans have access to \$80,000 for retraining, which is a wonderful initiative, but for many of us, traditional school is not possible. Several veterans I know who took part in this program did not complete the program. Meanwhile, financial support is not available for veterans who want to build their businesses—businesses that pay taxes, create jobs and restore purpose.

This is my story. I know there are many more like me. I stand here today with the fear that even this testimony could be used against me, but if we do not speak honestly, nothing will change.

My hope is that the committee will listen—truly listen—and help create a pathway for veterans to continue serving Canada in a post-service capacity. We still want to serve. We just need a system that does not punish us for trying to rebuild our lives.

• (1735)

I believe in veteran entrepreneurs. I believe in our resilience, our discipline and our capacity to contribute. Now, the path is not encouraged. It's not supported. That needs to change.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Leboeuf. Thank you for your service, sir.

I will now invite Mr. Potapenko to speak for five minutes.

Grigori Potapenko (As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Grigori Potapenko. I am a Canadian Armed Forces veteran and a full-time entrepreneur. I've built several businesses and have acquired one. I've also struggled to build them. Entrepreneurship is hard, and I won't pretend otherwise. In my own case, the biggest barrier has often been me—my decisions, my risk tolerance and my execution. Beyond individual accountability, there are structural factors that either accelerate or constrain outcomes. That's what I'd like to focus on today.

If you strip a business down to its fundamentals, there are really three things—capital, talent and a revenue engine. If you take one away, the business fails. In my experience, and in conversations with other veteran founders in Canada, our veteran entrepreneurship ecosystem struggles precisely in those three areas.

Number one is capital. It is always the primary barrier.

I bootstrapped my businesses off credit cards, and then used the proceeds from one venture to acquire another. My businesses were predominantly asset-light and Internet-based. I could not even consider pursuing opportunities that required significant upfront capital.

Veterans are trained to operate under pressure, manage risk and lead teams, but our current underwriting systems don't necessarily value or reward those signals. If veterans are, as some evidence suggests, a high-probability operator class, then capital should flow accordingly—not as a favour, but as a rational capital allocation.

That leads to a related opportunity. When we talk about entrepreneurship, we often think about start-ups—starting something from scratch, from zero, which is risky. We're missing a massive macroeconomic opportunity. Canada is facing a silver tsunami, a generational transfer of \$2 trillion in small and mid-sized businesses. Their owners age out, and thousands of viable companies need successors. At the same time, thousands of CAF members transition out each year. We're not systematically connecting those two transitions.

ETA, or entrepreneurship through acquisition, is buying and operating an existing business. It can be a lower-risk transition pathway than starting from scratch. It also preserves jobs, maintains productive capacity and stabilizes communities.

In the U.S., SBA- and VA-backed loan programs are frequently used for small business acquisitions, including by veterans. In Canada, there isn't a comparable veteran-focused acquisition pathway that I know of.

However, BDC recently launched a special fund to facilitate ETA for women entrepreneurs. That's an excellent initiative. A similar instrument for veteran operators would recognize the same principle. Targeted capital can unlock capable operators. If we are serious about productivity and SME continuity, funding veteran operators and connecting them with retiring business owners is a strategic lever. Once again, it's not preferential treatment; it's matching capability with opportunity.

Number two is talent. If we want veteran entrepreneurs to create jobs, we must reduce friction on their first hire. The jump from solo operator to employer is one of the most difficult transitions in business. Right now, however, our system often punishes veterans for their initiative.

I've spoken with multiple peers, including Kevin here, who were denied their benefits from EI or VAC because they decided to pursue a business instead of traditional employment. We're effectively saying, "We'll help you if you're an employee, but we'll penalize you if you're an employer." Measures could make a difference, such as a payroll tax holiday for the first hires, a wage subsidy for veteran-owned firms, and simplified federal hiring credits for veteran-owned businesses. Again, these are not special deals; they're growth accelerators applied to a population with demonstrated leadership and operational experience.

Several years ago, there was a program by RBC that subsidized hiring CAF veterans. I used it in my business, and it helped tremendously. Government already provides tax deductions and credits for apprentices, tradespersons and youth employment. Why not include veterans?

Number three is revenue. If Canada wants veteran entrepreneurs to succeed, government procurement is your biggest lever. Government is one of the biggest spenders in the country, but right now procurement is a black box. It's difficult for small firms to navigate. I could never figure it out myself, and lots of others couldn't either. Government procurement should be an economic development tool with mechanisms that recognize veteran-led firms where appropriate—again, not as a favour, but as a strategic allocation.

Finally, one major barrier that I experienced is the data and education gap. I attempted to launch a business on coaching and mentoring for veterans, and I couldn't find any data on the state of Canadian veteran-owned businesses. You cannot manage what you do not measure. If we don't measure it, we cannot design policy and we cannot track outcomes. We can't scale what works.

Why did I want to start the coaching program in the first place? At transition, they don't teach you that it is even an option. It was not presented to me during my transition. Exposure to this should start before release, not at the door.

• (1740)

If we measure properly, align capital intelligently, leverage procurement and reduce early hiring friction, veteran entrepreneurship can move from a niche topic to a meaningful contributor to Canada's productivity.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Potapenko. We really appreciate it.

Now, for five minutes, we'll go to Mr. Hennebery.

• (1745)

Christopher Hennebery (Chief Warrant Officer, Veterans Artist Collective): Madam Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Chief Warrant Officer Christopher Hennebery. I have served in the Canadian Armed Forces for nearly 41 years, beginning as a reserve infantry soldier in 1985.

I currently serve as the chief of employer support for western Canada and will conclude my service at the age of 60 in two years. I live in Vancouver with my wife, who is also a veteran, and I am a member of the Métis Nation of Ontario.

In addition to my military career, I have built a parallel life in business and the arts. I completed a master's in IT business administration in 2004 and have founded, owned and sold three companies since 1991. For more than 20 years, I have balanced entrepreneurship with reserve service.

In 2015, after selling my consulting firm, I joined SAP and currently serve as an account executive supporting some of the largest Fortune 50 organizations in North America. My civilian career has taken me into complex global boardrooms, but it was my military service that prepared me to succeed in these environments.

Art has also been a central part of my life. I studied at Emily Carr, and in 2011 I went to Afghanistan as a Canadian war artist. Today, that body of work hangs in galleries, messes and museums across Canada.

During the pandemic, I founded the Veterans Artist Collective, an initiative that focuses on two outcomes.

First, we deliver immersive weekend workshops in disciplines such as *plein-air* painting, metalsmithing and ceramics for veterans, serving CAF members and RCMP members and their spouses. Over 300 participants from across Canada have attended. Many live with operational stress injuries, depression, anxiety or PTSD. Our goal is to create a positive pathway to mental health through structured creative practice and community.

Second, we provide platforms for veterans to exhibit and sell their work. Our inaugural national exhibition in November 2024 coincided with the lead-up to the Invictus Games in Vancouver. This program exists solely through the generosity of True Patriot Love and the Royal Canadian Legion.

Over the past decade, I have observed something that's pretty concerning. There remains limited flexibility and tolerance for veterans who wish to transition into non-traditional careers, particularly entrepreneurial ones.

In 2014, I was introduced to a medically released soldier from the 3rd Battalion, PPCLI, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Danny was severely injured in an IED attack. He wanted to become a tattoo artist. He had passion but no formal training and no pathway within the existing retraining programs to pursue that goal. We explored whether his education benefits could support foundational training, but his VAC caseworker refused to allocate. Despite setbacks and no formal training, he persisted.

I contacted over 20 tattoo parlours in Vancouver that did not respond. Two actually did, and one owner said that he would have coffee with Danny. He was moved by his story. That coffee turned into a part-time cleaning job in the tattoo parlour, and Danny is now a successful, sought-after tattoo artist with his own business.

My journey was different. My service gave me leadership training, resilience and discipline, qualities that translated directly into entrepreneurial success. I was fortunate to find mentors who helped me interpret my military skill set into business language, but not every veteran is as fortunate.

The more complex the injury, physical or psychological, the more individualized and bespoke the transformation pathway needs to be. Entrepreneurship is a legitimate and powerful transition option for many veterans, yet our systems often default to conventional employment pathways that are not constructed to accommodate non-traditional ambitions.

If we truly believe in lifelong service and meaningful reintegration, then we must create flexible, responsive frameworks that rec-

ognize veterans as potential job creators, not only jobseekers. That's my ask. We need to create a more flexible program that allows our veterans to apply for those funds of \$80,000, especially the veterans who are suffering from PTSD, as most of the people in my program are, who cannot fit into those traditional models. Not only are we dangling the \$80,000 in front of them, but we're telling them they can't have it.

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

• (1750)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now open the floor to Mrs. Wagantall for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the three of you for what you're bringing to the table today. I appreciate the service that is represented here, as well, on behalf of Canada.

Mr. Leboeuf, I'm very curious. You're very open and honest about the dynamics of not being able to be the face of your business. You needed to transition to having your wife have more of that role in order to be recognized to a certain degree. We have heard from other witnesses very carefully stating that they are veterans, but the funding is more targeted to specific groups such as women, indigenous and Black. That's no problem, but you asked about the veterans. I heard, "What about the veterans?" Veterans are unique, as you've mentioned, and have so much capability and promise.

Is part of the dynamic I'm hearing here to recognize them as veterans to enable them, but at the same time give them the freedom they need to be able to make those choices that are being inhibited from them at this point in time? Is that a fair question?

Kevin Leboeuf: Yes, that's exactly it. In terms of the funding that's available—the \$80,000, let's say—I wouldn't say to give the \$80,000 right away to the veteran. It would be milestones that you would have to reach, maybe \$10,000 to start up.

We own our manufacturing, so we do our production, our videos, selling and everything. We do more than just order products from somewhere and then resell them. It was really hard within that. It's kind of sad because when you're in the military, especially in my job, you're taught to think outside the box a lot of the time, and to be comfortable in the uncomfortable is really a massive thing that is necessary to be a successful entrepreneur. You need to be able to absorb chaos and not spread it within your team. I think that's a massive skill that the veterans really own.

Cathay Wagantall: We also heard concerns around the things.... I think it has been mentioned here quite eloquently. The sense with VAC is that if you succeed, it's not only.... Well, in the back of their mind, it must be that you don't need your funds or your care any longer, and it's taken away. What does that say to you, as an individual individual who...? I mean, no matter what else you do with the rest of your life, you were told you would be taken care of when you returned home. Canadians supposedly, we hear, are compassionate and thankful, but this is something that I'm not sure is being handled properly.

Kevin Leboeuf: What's really interesting about that, actually, is that I wouldn't be able to do a job on a daily basis. What's really good about being an entrepreneur is that it's my set schedule; it's not nine-to-five. I do rely on my wife quite a lot to do the majority of the work on a daily basis. She is the CEO, and she does make lots of decisions on everything. I don't have to explain that I'm not coming up for a week or that I'm not doing this. I do therapy, and it's very inflexible. I go to all these appointments on a general basis.

Cathay Wagantall: I appreciate hearing that. It's important to this study.

Mr. Potapenko, you mentioned a couple of times the need for support and funding, and you also said that it's not a favour. I think there is that sense within our veteran community—and I do hear this—that if you're capable of doing this, then you shouldn't get special treatment, but everybody who's starting a business needs to be recognized for that potential. Can you elaborate a bit on that?

Grigori Potapenko: Sure. We've been institutionalized or trained to be self-reliant and not to ask for handouts or things of that nature. In fact, I invited several veteran entrepreneurs to this hearing, and the response was, "I built what I built without any help, and that's how it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be hard." That's fine. That's their opinion. I have a different opinion, so that's why.... I also read the minutes from previous hearings, and there was a phrase that caught my attention about looking for extra recognition versus looking for help. I think that's why veterans are not asking for this as a favour.

• (1755)

Cathay Wagantall: They're hesitant to do that.

Mr. Hennebery, I really appreciate what you bring to the table.

It was mentioned here that you can't manage what you cannot measure. I'm still getting used to the fact that I'm a politician, and it's been a decade. You can't manage what you cannot measure, and I see a lot of inability to measure in these circumstances. I think that's part of our challenge here with Veterans Affairs and with this committee.

Christopher Hennebery: It's not so much managing what you measure. The measurement tools we're using now are cookie-cutter, and they're not flexible. You can't use the same measurement tool for one veteran who served for eight years and comes out of it whole and well as you would for someone who served in an active war zone and comes out with PTSD. It's not the same.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

I was very polite. I apologize, sir.

[Translation]

Mr. d'Entremont, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

[English]

Thank you all for your service and for your testimony today.

We are starting to hear some of the same things as the presenters are coming to us and underlining a number of different challenges. Some of them are entrepreneurial in nature. Some of them are very much attached to being a veteran and how you're able to access different programs.

Monsieur Leboeuf, when you set up your business, how did your business match up? I'm going to guess it didn't match at all with what you were actually trained to do in the armed forces. How did the transition not set you up to be able to do the business you ended up setting up? It's kind of a double negative on that one.

Kevin Leboeuf: I was the majority shareholder because, obviously, my wife doesn't have a beard. Beard grooming and shaving products didn't really matter to her. I was going to be the face of the company, so I was the majority shareholder. Every time we asked for something, they said, "Oh, you're a veteran. What schooling do you have? What do you have there?"

Nothing applied the same way on the opposite side. When we changed the shareholder agreement again, which involved more lawyer fees and paperwork, then they said, "Oh, it's for a woman in business. Yes, please come in." It was a lot easier for us to navigate that way and to get a lot more help.

Chris d'Entremont: Were you able to access any VAC programming for that?

Kevin Leboeuf: After Manulife dropped me—and I didn't know that Manulife was supporting my disability benefits—a few months later, Veterans Affairs picked up my case. I did not know this was going to happen, so I continued. I did not know, for two or three months, that this was going to happen. I thought, "What do I do now?"

That was the only thing with Veterans Affairs Canada.

Chris d'Entremont: This is a good question for you, too. It seems that people who had the opportunity—that might be the wrong word—to be in a forward-operating situation can take a lot of stress. Is that a good thing in business, or is that actually a bad thing? Your stress level, or your capability of taking on that stress, is probably higher than what most businesses would be able to do.

Kevin Leboeuf: It really depends on who you ask. If you ask me, I love that chaos and that energy. My psychologist told me that's good, because I'm optimized for that level of stress. However, if you ask my wife, she will say that it's better with no stress, to reduce the stress level. It's very much a different opportunity. It works because I'll operate on stressful things, and she'll operate on the daily stuff.

Chris d'Entremont: I'm sure that right now, with the grooming requirements of the Canadian Armed Forces, your products are being used by current service members.

Kevin Leboeuf: Yes, we were really lucky. When we launched the company, the CANFORGENS changed for beards being allowed in the military, and we supplied CANEX right away. All the CANEXs across Canada picked up our brand. We were one of the first veteran-owned companies.

We've pushed that really hard. CANEX should have a section for veteran-owned companies to really promote those products. There is so much good talent in Canada—veterans who own companies that make fabulous products. I stand behind all of them. They should be in CANEX and be supported that way.

• (1800)

[Translation]

Chris d'Entremont: Thank you very much, Mr. Leboeuf.

[English]

Mr. Potapenko, I like the suggestion you made about the silver tsunami that's coming. You made me try to remember how to spell “tsunami”.

How do we match that up? When you come out of the Canadian Armed Forces as a pilot, you might not have the training to be the plumber, the mechanic or the Red Seal whatever we need in our communities. How do we match up some of those business opportunities in many communities across Canada?

Grigori Potapenko: I would suggest looking south of the border. They have taken steps in that regard, with SBA-backed loans for up to \$5 million U.S. to acquire small businesses, with up to 90% LTV. At a federal level, it's basically facilitating transfer from one generation to another by making lending accessible. Also, the VA loan specifically is being used by a lot of veterans there for launching real estate businesses. Those are two methods that I know of in terms of making it financially accessible.

Also, it's not done by the government, but there are organizations in the States that put in those transitioning veterans, such as a pilot officer, as an operator in a business. It could be a CEO position. They get a bit of equity. They buy in. They maybe don't buy the whole business—there are some investors behind them—but they're capable operators. They can lead. They can build a team and be in charge of that business.

Chris d'Entremont: I did like your comment that entrepreneurship is hard. It's probably one of the harder opportunities.

Mr. Hennebery, can you talk quickly about non-traditional jobs? When you get into the art realm, the business plan is not as normal as buying an electrician's business.

Christopher Hennebery: Yes, in our collective, we have about 600 members. About 100 of them are professional artists who are very successful.

Jodi Miller was a major in the air force. She's a painter now. She was a rocket scientist. She has a Ph.D. in aeronautics engineering. Now she's a full-time landscape painter. Her stuff at our show sold before we even put it up on the wall. She's very successful. We also have Roger Chabot, whom many people know as well.

These are all very successful people, but they're non-traditional. None of these people would qualify. For a lot of people, it's not just.... We live in a gig economy and not everybody is looking for that full-time job. They can only do part-time. A lot of these creative jobs are part of that, non-traditional.

The Chair: Thank you very much, sir.

[Translation]

Ms. Gaudreau will have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

She will be addressing you in French, so make sure you have your earpiece on before we start. I want to make sure that you can hear her in French.

[Translation]

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

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

Mr. Leboeuf, I don't know if you heard the previous witness's statements, but I feel like we got somewhere, that we may have put our finger on it. In the system, whether it's a politician, a public servant who fills out a document or a banker who has to manage the risk associated with the capital offered, I get the impression that, at the end of the day, people may not be interested in what they don't know. We've all seen movies, but you'll agree that seeing it in 2D and experiencing it are very different things.

We see that suffering in our studies. It's often present. I hope that this study will allow us to make a 180-degree turn, but not in the sense that we'll be applying a method or a program. Can we start from the bottom up? That means demystifying and promoting, not hiding what isn't working. I can give you a list; I think we've really identified a lot of things that aren't going well.

I'd like to hear your comments on that. That will give more weight to our recommendations.

Are we at the point of making this known and removing the label that veterans are injured, destroyed and that their lives are over?

Things have changed, but I'd like to hear your opinion on that.

• (1805)

Kevin Leboeuf: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Actually, being labelled was really hard to swallow. I didn't want to be labelled. It's over. I will deal with my own issues with my psychologist and whatever team I have behind me.

I find that being here, seeing that many other veterans have appeared before us, and knowing that others will appear after us is helpful. It's a first step. That's what we need to demystify. It needs to be highlighted to understand what's not working behind the scenes for veterans. We shouldn't have obstacles put in our way because that doesn't help mentally either. It was really hard to see that people thought I was a fraudster because I was becoming a veteran, when in fact I'm getting better and taking care of myself.

Since that happened, I've really stepped back from my company. We still make videos, but I really don't feel like it anymore. I have a little more energy than I used to, so that's better. It's good to have this. It's really not for us, because we've lived it. We've already seen it. It will really be for future veterans. It's very important.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Leboeuf.

Mr. Potapenko, what do you think?

[*English*]

Grigori Potapenko: I think we definitely need to work on removing the stigma. I have not personally experienced that, luckily, but I have met many people who have. Removing the stigma would definitely help.

Again, I'm going to refer to south of the border. They elevate their veterans everywhere. I don't want to say you should put us on a pedestal, but I think there are some lessons in terms of economic recognition as well.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It's all the more true when we talk about recruitment and pride.

Mr. Hennebury, you experience a double stigma—you're a veteran and an artist. I'm also an actor. I can imagine that it must not be easy, everything you've gone through and everything you're going through now.

I'd like to hear your thoughts on stigma.

[*English*]

Christopher Hennebery: I was at a young age when I was in the military, but I was also going to art school at the same time. There's a real dichotomy.

When we talk about labels, labels are not useful. At the end of the day, I speak for myself, but I also speak for the members of my collective. Nobody wants to be a burden on the state. There's not a single soldier out there, injured or otherwise, who says, "I want to be paid to sit at home." Nobody says that. Those labels interfere with that perception.

In a lot of cases, I don't think we have to do grand things. There don't have to be massive changes to the environment and the system that has been built. I think we need to start looking at this from a standpoint that entrepreneurship or being self-sufficient—whatever you want to call the small business you have that maybe doesn't get up to \$20,000—really augments you and makes you feel better, yet you're still able to contribute and create net value for your community. If we could do that and if we could free up some of the training funds to encompass that and leverage the existing programs, like the Prince's program and Helmets to Hardhats, which all have mentorship programs, it would be really meaningful.

I think it's going to hit a sweet spot with the veterans who are the most injured. For the ones who aren't—those who can get up in the morning and just hit it—that \$80,000 is amazing, but it leaves out everybody else. That's the piece we need to look at. There's a sweet spot that we need to look at.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much. It's perfect timing.

We'll now begin our second round. It will start with five minutes for Mrs. Kronis.

• (1810)

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your service to the country.

[*English*]

It's been an honour to hear your testimony today, because you clearly care immensely about Canada, about your communities and also about your colleagues. It's really heartening to see that.

You've each commented on the way government policies fall short in facilitating veteran entrepreneurship. You've outlined steps that could be taken to fix that, but every one of the activities you've described would require investment to create the kind of pathways you're describing, even when they're done on a "not as a favour" basis.

I'd like to give each of you a chance to talk and put your thoughts on the record about any concerns you might have about the \$4.23 billion in cuts proposed to Veterans Affairs and spelled out in the 2025 budget. I'd also really love to hear from you about the ideas you have for how Canada can do better to facilitate the kinds of programs you're talking about.

Grigori Potapenko: That's a really good question.

I have a finance degree—I wove it into my presentation—so for me it's a capital allocation decision. We don't have that statistic in Canada, because, again, we don't measure it. However, I believe I saw statistics that, in the U.S., veteran-owned businesses have a lower failure rate than non-veteran-owned. Another statistic I saw is that Israel has an abnormally, disproportionately high degree of successful start-ups compared to the rest of the world because of their mandatory military service. On those two data points, it's basically a less risky financial capital allocation decision to invest in veterans. That's one suggestion.

Another one is that, for lack of a better term, sometimes you just need to get out of our way. To give you an example, when I was trying to jump-start this coaching program, I had a call with Veterans Affairs Canada, and they said, "We like what you do, but we cannot help you promote your stuff. We cannot endorse you." If only they could help these grassroots initiatives that are popping up, like what Christopher is doing, and Kevin, and the Prince's Trust, and Treble Victor, and I can name a lot more.... Help us. Help us help ourselves. That doesn't necessarily require investment.

Those are my two points.

Tamara Kronis: It's still going to require Veterans Affairs to do more with less. When they change programs and create programs, even if it doesn't require them to fund you anymore, it will still cost the department money that they're not actually going to have, which is where some of my concerns come from.

I'd love to hear what your perspectives are, Mr. Leboeuf or Mr. Hennebery.

Christopher Hennebery: I've been working in business my entire life. Some of the biggest companies.... My current customers are Amazon, Google and T-Mobile. At the end of the day, there are finance decisions being made. I get that, but I don't necessarily agree that these funds.... These funds are allocated as part of your yearly budget. I get that there are going to be pullbacks. A lot of those are probably coming from capital projects, I imagine.

Tamara Kronis: Veterans Affairs doesn't have—

Christopher Hennebery: Right, but my point on that is that whenever they get into a situation—and I see this with companies that I work with all the time—where they have to look at their budget, and look at it aggressively, they need to be a lot smarter with their allocations and look at those things that are going to create the most value.

I don't think a lot of people here are asking for more funds. What people are asking for is a more attuned allotment of those funds, especially when we talk about retraining. That's what everybody has said, really. I think that has been very consistent from at least four of the panellists we've seen.

There needs to be a better way to allocate those funds. Throwing people into university is not necessarily going to create the most value. I have two kids in university. I can tell you that, 100%. I see lots of unemployed people with degrees. I think we need to be a lot more clever with those funds, and we need to be a lot more open—and I know I'm in the creative industry—to being creative and getting out of this little box that we've put ourselves into.

• (1815)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next is Mr. Clark for five minutes.

Welcome back.

Braedon Clark (Sackville—Bedford—Preston, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's great to be back.

Thank you, all three of you, for being here today. Thank you very much for your service as well.

Mr. Leboeuf, I know that, in general, it is inadvisable to comment on people's appearances, but that's a tremendous beard. I assume you use your own products. I think that's a safe assumption. You're a walking testimonial, which is great. I was just doing a little research. There are two retailers in my riding, actually, in Nova Scotia, that carry your products, so that's great, and I see there are many red dots across the map of the country. Congratulations on that.

I'll ask you this, Mr. Leboeuf, and then, if I can, I'll just move it across to all three of you. It may be difficult to do this, I know, because it's a big topic, but could you distill down your experience as entrepreneurs in your post-military careers? In looking back on it, or being actively in it right now, what would be the one thing, from a pragmatic, practical standpoint, that you think would have made the most difference in what you're trying to do? What would have made it much easier for you to get where you're at today and then, hopefully, scale up beyond that?

I'll start with you, Mr. Leboeuf.

Kevin Leboeuf: Supporting veterans would have been very helpful. Not having to change the company over to a woman-owned business would have been great.

Also, there's no real incentive to becoming an entrepreneur. Let's say you're on disability benefits. You're allowed to make \$20,000 a year extra. If you go over, you're losing dollar for dollar. I get it. I understand. However, by that point, you're thinking, "Why am I doing this? Am I going to create a job that will take 20 years to make \$100,000 a year to replace that full salary?" I already have a basement apartment in my house—I made that financial decision when I was young—that brings me up to \$19,000, so I should probably not do anything else and just rot on my couch. There's not really an incentive there.

Entrepreneurs create so many jobs and so much tax money that goes back to the government, which is much better than folks who went to school, spent \$70,000 and never went back to that domain. They never went back to work and just live on the couch now, because they're not able to do what they studied. I think it's a much better financial approach to support the entrepreneur who is going to give back to the community—give back to government in taxes and employee taxes.

Braedon Clark: That's wonderful. Thank you.

Mr. Potapenko.

Grigori Potapenko: I had a couple of minutes to think it over.

It would be the number two point in my address: hiring incentives. At the time I was hiring, it would have been helpful to get that subsidy, tax credit or whatever to help hire more people in Canada and scale the business.

Braedon Clark: Mr. Hennebery.

Christopher Hennebery: When I owned my companies.... I started them in my apartment as well. The hardest thing for me to learn when I went through that process was the bootstrapping to start a business. Any person who doesn't start out with a lot of capital—if any—has to really get smart about their bootstrapping and how to create their business from nothing.

It would be such an easy course. Prince's Trust has support for that, but to see that formalized in some way would be awesome. There are a lot of skills you can get from the process of understanding bootstrapping—how to get financing, how to do your marketing and how to create a product. It's about understanding the very basics of business, the value of a product and how to intrinsically create more value from that product.

Those are really basic values that anybody taking that program would benefit from, especially anybody trying to start a small business.

Braedon Clark: Do I have any time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have 45 seconds.

Braedon Clark: Okay.

Mr. Potapenko, on your point about hiring incentives, I assume, based on your answer, that nothing existed for you that was specifically related to your status as a veteran.

Grigori Potapenko: The RBC program was available at the time, but that was a private institution offering it—the Royal Bank. It wasn't a government initiative.

Braedon Clark: I understand. Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mrs. Gaudreau.

• (1820)

[*Translation*]

She will have the floor for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Please put your earpieces in, as she will be addressing you in French.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you.

Were you encouraged or discouraged by Veterans Affairs Canada when your entrepreneurial project started to grow? Were you encouraged, discouraged or neither?

Mr. Hennebery, do you want to comment on that?

[*English*]

Christopher Hennebery: It didn't even play a role in that. It was not a factor. When I started my business, I was 20 years old. I had only been in the military for about three years. I was going to school full time. Even after I left school, I ran that company for 10 years.

There was nothing in place. I'm probably one of the oldest ones here, and it was a time back when the military didn't have a lot of funds. If anything, the military taught me how to bootstrap, because it's very good, especially at the unit level, at trying to make the most of nothing.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I don't have much time.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Potapenko, do you want to comment?

[*English*]

Grigori Potapenko: Similar to Mr. Hennebery, I started while I was in. It's a good thing they didn't get in the way.

As I mentioned, during my exit interview many years later, there wasn't an entrepreneurial stream. They asked me what I wanted to do. Did I want a job, or something? I said, "No, I have a business," and that was it. There was nothing offered.

[*Translation*]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Okay.

Mr. Leboeuf, any thoughts?

Kevin Leboeuf: I would say it's probably neutral. I was neither encouraged nor discouraged. In fact, we really do our own thing.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: So there was no specific service to support you. Instead, you were asked where you were at and what you intended to do next.

Is that correct?

Kevin Leboeuf: Yes.

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That's perfect.

That's all, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

I haven't done this yet, but I would like to ask one of our witnesses a question.

You talked about the RBC program. Very briefly, do you know why it doesn't exist anymore? Is there a particular reason?

Grigori Potapenko: Madam Chair, that sends me down memory lane. That was around 2018 or 2019. It was probably a pilot or maybe it was temporary, I'm not sure. They did it for two or three years in conjunction with a non-profit organization. They were placing new immigrants, veterans and some other underprivileged

people into work, and RBC was bankrolling that. I don't know why they don't do it anymore.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

That concludes the round of questions.

[*English*]

We're coming to the end of our meeting.

I want to say, on behalf of our committee, thank you very much. Thank you for your service and for taking part in this study. It's a very important study. We hope to see good recommendations, and your comments were extremely valuable.

[*Translation*]

Have a wonderful evening.

[*English*]

For our members, I will now adjourn, and we can say goodbye to our witnesses.

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>