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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Neil Ellis (Bay of Quinte, Lib.)): I'd like to call the meeting to order. I do apologize. We had a vote, so we're starting a bit late.

Today is the last public hearing in relation to the study of needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans.

In December 2017, the Office of the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman published a report entitled "Canadian Rangers: A Systemic Investigation of the Factors That Impact Healthcare Entitlements and Related Benefits of the Rangers". As a committee, we'll go to Yellowknife and visit the rangers community next week. The timing is perfect.

We're pleased to welcome Gary Walbourne, Ombudsman.

Gary, we'll open it up to you for 10 minutes. I see you have Robyn Hynes and Amanda Hansen-Reeder with you. Thank you for coming.

Mr. Gary Walbourne (Ombudsman, National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to once again thank you for inviting representatives from this office to appear before your committee to discuss issues that are pertinent to current and former members of the Canadian Armed Forces and their families.

Joining me today are Robyn Hynes, Director General of Operations, and Amanda Hansen-Reeder, Acting Director, Systemic Investigations. Both Ms. Hynes and Ms. Hansen-Reeder were actively involved in the development of the report, and if I can't answer your questions, they can.

Your study on the needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans will serve to inform both public discourse and government decision-making moving forward. I believe that the recommendations contained in my recent report on the Canadian rangers regarding the factors that impact health care entitlements and related benefits will serve as a valuable guidepost for this important discussion surrounding the health and wellness of our eyes and ears of the north. I am also pleased to say that our office has published this report in five indigenous languages. It's the first time for our office.

Our office launched this systemic investigation in 2016 after preliminary research of the Canadian rangers organization found

several areas of concern in the determination of an appropriate type of reserve service, concerns with the absence of the requirement for medical examinations for rangers prior to enrolment, and a lack of awareness on the part of the Canadian rangers with regard to their entitlement to the Canadian Armed Forces health care treatment and employment benefits.

Our dedicated team of systemic investigators travelled extensively to conduct in-person interviews with rangers, rangers instructors, chaplains, commanding officers, members of the Canadian Ranger National Authority, the Canadian Forces health services, Canadian Joint Operations Command, various branches of chief military personnel, Health Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, and others. Over 150 interviews were conducted, often in remote locations, to ensure that the voices of these constituents were heard and understood.

Before proceeding to the findings and recommendations of my report, I want to take a couple of minutes to speak to the uniqueness of the Canadian rangers as members of the Canadian Armed Forces. This uniqueness is rooted in cultural, geographical and socio-economic circumstances.

First, there is no doubt that the Canadian rangers organization and the junior Canadian rangers program have a positive impact on northern and remote communities. The transfer of traditional knowledge from elders to youth is embedded, valued and relied upon for mission success. The structure from enrolment to promotions and beyond is decided upon by that community. The model binds the Canadian rangers organization and the junior Canadian rangers program in core principles of honesty, integrity, learning and purpose.

As testimony to the importance of the traditional knowledge and skills that Canadian rangers bring to the Canadian Armed Forces, they are not subject to a compulsory retirement age. Many Canadian rangers, in every sense of the word, end up being rangers for life. Whether it is a critical search and rescue mission, a patrol or a large-scale Arctic sovereignty mission, knowledge of the land, coastline and climate can literally mean life or death for young members who have not become intimately familiar with their surroundings. Simply put, elder knowledge is a heck of a value proposition.

In order to satisfy operational requirements and to maintain the importance of traditional knowledge within the force structure, Canadian rangers are not subject to some physical and age requirements. For example, there is no mandatory retirement age, and this allows elders to continue playing an important role within the organization past their 60th birthday. Additionally, they are not subject to meeting the universality of service principle related to the physical fitness of regular force or primary reservists during their careers. While the Canadian rangers medical requirement on enrolment is to be physically and psychologically fit to perform foreseeable duties, a medical examination is not required. These unique conditions are essential to making this organization work, and after a thorough examination of the organization, I personally believe that it wouldn't work any other way.

What we have seen in our review of the Canadian rangers is that policies that serve us well in downtown Ottawa may not serve us well in the northern and remote locations that are served by these members. Try issuing a cheque to a Canadian ranger in a community where there is no bank, or ask someone to fill out a form online when the nearest Wi-Fi hot spot is 1,000 kilometres away. That ranger, by the way, may not speak, read, or write English or French.

This uniqueness was factored into the findings and recommendations contained in our report, and by virtue of this committee studying the needs and issues pertaining to this community, you, as members, will no doubt frame your recommendations accordingly.

Of the findings contained in our report, there are a few stand outs that I believe are especially relevant to your study. First, Canadian rangers' illness and injuries are not being consistently reported or adequately tracked. Second, the Canadian rangers' access to health care, particularly specialized medical services, is affected by the fact that most live in remote and isolated communities. Finally, most Canadian rangers are not aware of their Canadian Armed Forces health care benefit entitlements. Further to that, 89% of those interviewed did not know they were eligible for benefits administered by Veterans Affairs Canada.

● (1545)

These findings led my office to make four evidence-based recommendations carefully aimed at the need to better inform the Canadian ranger community, not only of their health care entitlements, but also to emphasize the importance for rangers to report their injuries, thus identifying barriers to access to these entitlements and developing and implementing a service delivery model that is responsive to the unique needs of these constituents. Our office also provided recommended timelines for the implementation of these recommendations.

In the coming months, I hope our office will issue a report card on the progress of the Canadian Armed Forces' implementation of these recommendations. The report card will be published on our website, as we have done for all other systemic reviews. This will show Canadians that they can also track the progress on these important issues.

Some of the findings contained in this report, as well as the ability for the Canadian Armed Forces to implement the recommendations contained therein, are firmly tied to the under-resourcing of the Canadian ranger instructor cadre. The current ratio of Canadian

ranger instructors to rangers and junior Canadian rangers is simply untenable. If we compare the ratios contained in our 2017 report to statistics recently provided to us by the Canadian Armed Forces, an apples-to-apples comparison, if you will, the current average ratio for full-time staff to Canadian rangers and junior Canadian rangers is 1:41 compared to 1:36 in 2017.

If we isolate these ratios specific to the Canadian ranger instructors, the ratio has jumped from an average of 1:176 in March of this year to 1:183 in September of this year. The ratio at the First Canadian Ranger Patrol Group in Yellowknife is currently 1:239.

The large administrative burdens placed on this group of individuals heavily impacts their ability to educate and support Canadian rangers in their patrols. The department has clearly indicated to our office that it recognizes this burden and is working to alleviate the overall workload. Our office will continue to track their progress in this regard.

What is clear is that a surge of effort is required to better educate and inform Canadian rangers on how they can and should be supported during their daily operations and when they become ill or injured as a result of those activities. Knowing that they are well supported by both their chain of command as well as health care providers will improve efficiency of operations and morale moving forward.

It is my hope that these recommendations contained in the report are implemented swiftly. The responses from both the Minister of National Defence and the Canadian Army have been encouraging to our office.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, before my team and I take some questions, I want to once again thank you for your efforts to provide evidence-based recommendations to government relating to the defence community. Your efforts do not go unnoticed.

On your trip up north, speak not only with those who are paraded in front of you but to those who work behind the scenes. In the ombudsman's office, we are often privy to what I call the ground truth. We hear many buzzwords and fancy initiatives. Sometimes there's action on the ground, but more times there isn't. We know, because we still get calls, emails and in-person communications from these individuals. As I've always said, evidence doesn't lie.

We are now free to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll start with Ms. Wagantall for six minutes,

● (1550)

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

Thank you very much, sir, for being here and sharing this information with us. It's very timely for us as we go up to Yellowknife.

I want to jump right into the issue of ratio of full-time staff. We're going to Yellowknife, where it's 1:239. Where is that full-time staff located?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Most likely it's in Yellowknife, and one CRPG would be based in Yellowknife.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You were talking about the problem with, when rangers do have an injury or an illness, getting them to fill out the proper paperwork and do what they're supposed to do. Would that fall under the responsibility of that one person dealing with—

Mr. Gary Walbourne: The Canadian ranger instructor would be responsible for those.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's not working. What really practical changes would need to be made so that this doesn't happen?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: When you talk about ratios, it's simply a manning issue. This is a resourcing issue.

I've talked to some Canadian ranger instructors who have spent from 160 to 200 days a year in travel just out to the patrol groups. As I said, that's just not sustainable. This is a straight-up resourcing issue. If we could bring those ratios to what I would feel would be an acceptable level, then I think we could start to have that opportunity to educate the rangers on what their entitlements are and what the benefits are.

Reporting of injuries is difficult across the Canadian Armed Forces. There is a certain mentality that comes to bear, and the rangers have been a little more isolated than most. I'm not quite sure their awareness level is where it should be.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: In that case, the first thing we think is that it's an awareness issue for them of why it's important to —

Mr. Gary Walbourne: It's an education and awareness issue.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: The government, through its new defence policy, has committed to increasing the size and effectiveness of the Canadian rangers. I'd like to know, in your opinion, if that is advisable and achievable under the current structure.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I believe anything is achievable.

I would go back and pound the drum again that we cannot continue to increase those ratios. We have to bring those into line to something that's sensible and can be managed. For someone to have 1:239 and probably 16 or 17 communities to visit and then there are patrols they have to conduct every year, if we're going to resource it properly, attracting the rangers is one issue. I think the primary issue is making sure that the Canadian ranger instructor group is well supported and is flush enough so that they can take on those additional duties. Just to add more people into a system without putting structure behind it will be problematic.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Did you actually travel to Yellowknife as part of your—

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Personally I went to Yellowknife and Behchoko, and Gimli, but these ladies have travelled extensively across the country, to all five CRPGs.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: In your envisioning of what it should look like with more support there, right now the ratio is 1:239 in Yellowknife. What would be a reasonable expectation to shore that up so that it could function efficiently?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I believe that ratio will not be balanced across the country. When you look at some Canadian ranger

instructors, their patrol groups can be within 200 or 300 kilometres of where they are. Other patrol groups may be considerably farther than that and they may have more groups.

I think the ratio will have to be dependent on the geographical situation and the size of the patrol units that the instructor is overseeing. I think it will vary across the country.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: When they sign up would that not be an ideal time to do that first overhaul initiation of what those privileges are as far as support and care are concerned?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I would fully agree with that. Yes, it would be a great opportunity to get them at the first stage.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Has that not happened?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: There is a program that has been put in place where they're bringing the rangers closer to the centre to do some heavy training and to give them orientation for a few weeks. I think that is starting to have a positive effect on the ground, but it's going to be a while before that ripples across the organization completely. I still go back to the Canadian ranger instructors. I think that's the group that needs support.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Are you aware of numbers for up north in these various locations as to how many served as rangers but are now veterans?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: As I said, there is no mandatory retirement age for the rangers. They serve, and they serve for life. I've met rangers who have been in their seventies, elders in their community, with a wealth of information and they stay engaged. To give a definite number for veterans who have left the ranger cadre, it's a number I do not have. Sorry.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: So part of the issue there, or I guess the advantage in some ways, is some of our armed forces would see that they don't have to deal with universality of service, but they also don't go into combat. It's a very different dynamic from the rest of the armed forces.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: It is a very unique group.

• (1555)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Yes. You had mentioned that the policies that exist in Ottawa don't exactly apply north of 60. Can you elaborate on that?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I'll expand a little on the two examples I gave.

Say we want to do a straight bank deposit. My cheque goes in the bank every two weeks. I don't see it, but it goes in the bank every two weeks. That's easy for me. It's not so easy in a community where there is no bank or no ATM machine, things like that. A lot of the things we're doing now we're pushing it to websites and autofill applications and so on and so forth. This is where the world is going, but the infrastructure is just not there for that.

Those are just two basic ideas that come to bear. There are other policies that work well downtown, how you should be dressed and what you do, but it's not going to work at -40, -45. There are differences and we need to be very cognizant of those differences. When we make a policy for the north, we should have the north in mind as we do that.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. So—

The Chair: I'm sorry, your time is up.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again for coming. It's always a pleasure to see you, all of you.

We talked a lot in a previous study on barriers to transition about universality of service. As you know, we identified some problems that it was causing for veterans in their transition and delay in reporting injuries when they served and this sort of thing. I find it interesting, as I say, that it's not a principle in the rangers. Can you offer an opinion as to why they made this differentiation for the rangers?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I wasn't there at the beginning when they decided how they were going to do this, but if you look at some of the maladies that are in that community, diabetes is very high, and heart disease starts early. Those were some of the things that were taken into consideration, I'm sure, the health of that community. Just simply getting access to medical health care is also I'm sure one of the considerations that was given.

They do a preliminary review to see if the individual is physically fit and seems to be psychologically balanced enough to become a ranger. I would assume those were some of the influences. I'm not sure if those were the only ones.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Good. Thank you.

Has there been any pressure at any time either from National Defence or anyone else to start establishing such a policy in the rangers?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Do you mean in regard to universality of service?

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Yes.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I have not seen that, no.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: You might have touched on this. If a ranger can't work because of an illness or injury that is attributable to service, is that ranger eligible for financial benefits from Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: You mentioned that it's sometimes difficult to tell whether they're in service. Did you say it's the training officer who is the one who will say that the person is in service? If a ranger or a ranger veteran is making a claim, who determines that they are in service or not?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: It will depend on the type of contract they're under. Under the reserves, it's class A, class B or class C, which has an impact on types of benefits and services they have access to. If they have a malady that's attributable to service, it's a Canadian ranger instructor who is the person who is left holding the bag to make sure that the rangers are aware of what they're entitled to and help them to get to that point.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Okay.

Is the ranger instructor the one who will be responsible for determining whether they were in service at the time?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Most likely, yes.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: What might you recommend to make sure that people serving in the rangers are informed of the benefits they would get under Veterans Affairs and how they can best access them?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think the first thing we have to do is go to where they are. We need to be in front of these people. We need to educate and train them. We have to make sure, when we're publishing documents that are policy, that they're in language that can be understood by the intended target audience.

Those are some of the things I would recommend we start to look at.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: This is great. You're answering the questions very quickly, so I'm getting to ask a lot of them, so thank you. I'm getting a lot of information out here.

We talked about some of the distinctions between the rangers and the regular military. I understand that they cannot participate in military operations. Is that correct? If there's a military operation going on somewhere in their range or where they're serving, can they participate with the military in a formal military operation?

• (1600)

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Yes, search and rescue is a great example in the north. I mean, if there's a mission for search and rescue, probably the first line of attack is going to be the ranger group. If there is suspicious behaviour on the land, it's probably going to be the ranger group who is there first. So they do participate in military missions.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right. I was misinformed on that. Thank you for clearing that up.

Do you have any idea the number of rangers or former rangers who are currently clients of Veterans Affairs?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: No, I don't have visibility on that number.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: All right.

I'm going to go back to my original question about universality of service. Again, we found that it did tend that, as applied in the Department of National Defence, there were people who were not reporting minor injuries because they were afraid that they would get basically tossed because of that. Then the injuries would get worse and worse and they'd be much sicker because they hadn't reported.

With the lack of this in the rangers, do they find that there is any hesitancy among rangers to report illness or injuries? I know it's very difficult to compare rates between them and the military, but did you get any sense talking to the people that there was a hesitancy or anything in the culture that discouraged the reporting of illness or injury?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: We found several things in the environment that caused that. First and foremost, it's the same with any other military member. It's the fear of not being included. If they're sick or injured, they can't perform on a patrol group and they may miss that opportunity. The thought of leaving the rangers—and you will notice this very clearly when you start talking to some of the rangers, the pride in what they do. Being part of the rangers is vitally important to them, so anything that may impact their not being able to participate is a cause for them not to come forward.

Secondarily, one of the biggest issues we've found is access to health care. Usually it means they have to come out of their community, travel thousands of kilometres and be gone for long periods of time, away from their support group, away from their families. There's some reticence to approach the Canadian Armed Forces because of that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you.

First, Mr. Walbourne, on behalf of the federal NDP, I want to thank you. We know that your term expires at the end of next week. We want to thank you for your service to those who are serving and to the veterans in our country and for the important work you and your team have done. We're very grateful.

In your written brief to the committee, you mentioned that 89% of the Canadian rangers your office interviewed did not know they were eligible for benefits administered by Veterans Affairs Canada. For the record and this committee, do you have any insight as to why this was?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: It's very simple. It's just the lack of knowledge. I don't think they've been briefed on what is potentially there in the future for them.

I keep talking about the Canadian ranger instructors. These folks are left with doing it all: all the administration, the education, the training and the patrols. There's just not enough time in the day.

I do believe that it's simply a lack of knowledge. We need to make it important that we explain what's available. I think that's going to be a better approach than waiting for them to step forward to ask.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you think it's a matter of the Canadian Armed Forces not making these facts known and of them not being resourced enough, basically?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think it does come down to resources.

Mr. Gord Johns: In terms of resources, we've talked a lot about ensuring there's representation in terms of caseworkers too.

While we've been doing this study, we've asked indigenous veterans if they feel that if they're 2.8% of the veterans who served in the military, Veterans Affairs should have 2.8% of caseworkers who are indigenous veterans, so that they could understand each other. As you know, that's part of the biggest challenge our veterans face when they're dealing with Veterans Affairs. Do you think that would be appropriate for indigenous veterans?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think that lines up with many other things we've heard. A military member who's transitioning out would like to talk to an ex-military member so that they're talking the same language.

I'm sure it would be the same for the indigenous community, but I'll go back to something a little more basic than that. Even putting policy in a language that is acceptable and available to them would go a long way. Right now, if they want to see what a policy looks like, as I said earlier, there may be members of the Canadian rangers who neither speak nor write French or English. If we're not putting it in a language in which they can consume it, I think we've lost an opportunity.

• (1605)

Mr. Gord Johns: To break down those barriers, the cultural and language barriers, obviously it's about communication tools, but also about having staff employed who can communicate with them. Would you see that as a priority that you think would be important right now?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I don't know if it's a priority, but I'm sure it is something that would have a value-add to the proposition, for sure.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you think Veterans Affairs has failed to make the benefits known to the veterans?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Well, I think we all have a part to play. At the ombudsman's office, I was quite proud to say that we published our report in five indigenous languages. I'm also sad to say that it's the first time we've done it. I think it's an opportunity for us to learn also in terms of what we can do to help this group.

Mr. Gord Johns: What other specific recommendations are there on how to get that 89% number down to zero? Again, I certainly do want to commend you for the five languages that you used to get your message out there. It's really important to demonstrate to the communities that you're speaking to them in their language, but are there other recommendations to get that number down to zero from 89% in terms of those who don't know about the benefits that are available to them?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I'll go back again and pound on this again. I think if we're going to increase the ranger group, we need to make sure that we increase the ranger instructors group proportionately, if not faster than that. Those folks spend the time on the land with the rangers, days and days on end with the rangers, and I think that is the opportunity to educate and share information. That's one part from the Canadian Armed Forces, I'm sure, and I would refer to Veterans Affairs. I'm sure there are things we could do through Veterans Affairs. I know that they recently opened an office in Yellowknife, so there's an opportunity. There are many opportunities, but it will be up to Veterans Affairs Canada to determine how they want to educate their constituents.

Mr. Gord Johns: In your report on the rangers, you say that if a ranger gets injured during his or her activities it may be difficult to determine whether or not that happened when they were in service and therefore whether they can qualify for certain benefits or services. Can you identify where this ambiguity comes from and who determines whether or not a ranger is in service?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Again, it goes back to the type of contract they're employed under: reserve class A, B or C. Were they on an authorized function on behalf of the Canadian Armed Forces? These things will be the primary determinants as to whether not the illness or injuries can be attributable to service. It's much the same as anyone else. Again, it's up to the Canadian rangers instructor, the only person left out there, to make sure that all that happened at the same time.

Mr. Gord Johns: In your report, you point out some gaps in the attention that is paid to the reporting of injuries and illnesses by the Canadian Armed Forces. What is the procedure for reporting and documenting an injury that may be related to the Canadian ranger's military service, and is it the same procedure that is followed by any other member of the Canadian Armed Forces?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I'll add a few words, and then I'll just turn it over to my staff.

It is basically the same process. You have an injury and report it. We fill out a CF 98, and the commanding officer gets it and forwards it on.

These ladies were on the ground, and they can talk a little bit more about that.

Ms. Robyn Hynes (Director General, Operations, National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman):

That is exactly the process that they follow, so it's the same process that any other member of the Canadian Armed Forces would follow. Of course, it is more difficult because of the geographical dispersion of the Canadian rangers and the amount of time that each Canadian ranger instructor is able to spend in each particular community. Depending on when the incident happened, it may take

some time before the actual Canadian ranger instructor is back in that community to be able to help the ranger fill out the necessary paperwork, for example.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bratina.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thanks for all that. We don't keep track of your daily calendar, so I'm impressed that you visited these far off places. It enabled you to incorporate real, solid information into your report. I was pleased to bring the motion forward that we go up and have a look, in part because I feel they deserve our respect. I wonder in your meetings with those folks whether you got a sense that they feel that nobody is paying any attention to them up there.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I'll speak to that, and then I'll definitely turn it over to these two because they spent many weeks on the road.

What I found when I engaged with the rangers—and I'll say it again—was a tremendous sense of pride in being a ranger. Being identified in their community as rangers is large to them. It really is a big thing. I think the reason we were so welcome is that we were there on their land at that time as their guests. I have to say that we were treated royally. They are a tremendous group of people.

I will let the ladies speak because they were actually on the ground in all of the five CRPGs across the country.

Amanda.

• (1610)

Ms. Amanda Hansen-Reeder (Acting Director, Systemic Investigations, National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman): I would echo that exact sentiment. They were incredibly proud of the work they do for the armed forces, and they are proud to wear the ranger hoodie. Like Mr. Walbourne said, most of them are rangers for life, and it's really an emblem of pride for them.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Do they feel that they are far from the madding crowd and that nobody really knows what's going on?

Ms. Amanda Hansen-Reeder: Yes. There was definitely the sense of... They talked a lot about the south, about policies in the south that don't apply to them. They refer to it a lot as "us versus the south". That was definitely something that came through.

Mr. Bob Bratina: There are other things happening, in addition to the rangers, which may involve indigenous veterans.

We have the base at Alert. There is a new base being completed, a summer sailing type of base at Nanisivik, I believe. I'm wondering if you had many encounters with those folks, who are in roughly the same territory as the rangers, on their unique issues.

My sister was posted in Alert back in 1980. She was one of the first women to go up there. She didn't talk too much about it, so I don't really know what the depth of her experience was.

Do you hear, in your office, issues from those Far North postings, in addition to the rangers' issues that we're involved in?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Not a lot. We haven't had much to do with something that far remote. Those are very specific term positions that people are in. They know what the task is going in. I think they are well prepared going in, so we've never had any complaints, specifically, from that group.

Mr. Bob Bratina: The issue that's growing is the work that the Russians are doing in their own Arctic. They have brigades of soldiers north of the Arctic Circle. They have a fairly substantial population there, and we have the rangers.

I'm wondering if they feel pressure on the lack of resources in view of things like climate change, a potential Russian threat and so on. Do they talk about their role in a very important part of Canada and the amount of resources that they're able to bring to it? Are they fairly content with what they're doing and the way they're doing it?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: There's always a resourcing issue. Let's look at the exchange of the rifles. For the rangers, that is something they've wanted to see happen much more quickly than it has happened. I know they've started, and I understand there's a process behind everything. However, even with the issuance of the hoodies, for them, there was a time when there was a shortage and a few people in that patrol group didn't have one. That was a real issue, because again it's a sense of pride and position.

As for the rest of it, for pay grades, that's far above my head.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Okay.

What about the question of open-ended service, for rangers in their sixties, and so on? Are they able to access veterans benefits even though they haven't formally signed off, or should they? Is there a way that we can resolve that specific issue?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: No, that mechanism exists today. We have serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces who are also clients of Veterans Affairs Canada. The last number I heard was somewhere around 8,000 to 10,000 members. That mechanism is in place.

Mr. Bob Bratina: That's interesting for those folks, because they tend not to have resources nearby as it is. Then I'm thinking, after many years of service and the type of wear and tear that happens on the body and the psyche, if they're not able to get what we would call normal service and now there's a specialized concern because of their advancing age, weariness and so on, are there ways to get them those services?

By the way, the report is excellent. I'm asking some of these esoteric questions because we can take right out of these words that you've written angles for us to come up with recommendations.

I wonder as well about the other aspects of their lives as veterans in the Far North, the rangers themselves. Have you been able to conjure up a way that services could be delivered more meaningfully? I know it's resources, but are there mobile units? What could we do for them?

•(1615)

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Any and all of those things are possible. One thing we're going to have to wrap our minds around is that we have a constituency base for which we are responsible and they're not coming to us, so it's incumbent on us to go to them. There is no other option.

As I said, when the nearest Wi-Fi hotspot is 1,000 kilometres away, you're not going to get many emails or get online to fill out your forms. If we intend to increase the number of rangers and have a presence in the north, and if they can't get to us, then it's our job to go to them.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Samson.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and to all of you, thank you for being here.

Mr. Walbourne, I want to thank you, as my colleague did, for your service and your hard work and dedication. With your history, of course, and experience coming into the job and now leaving, you would make for a good book to read someday. I just want to throw that at you.

I have a number of questions. Some of the key things you mentioned are so crucial, such as knowledge of the land. You can't buy that. To some extent, you almost can't teach it unless you come from there. I get caught up when in the north they refer to "the south", that we're all in the south. They feel that they're quite a distance away.

We as a country, and as government, have shown much more interest in the north. The need for rangers is probably higher every day. We do recommend other regions where we could be, where we could have stations and whatnot. I don't know how many stations are out there right now, where we have a main station and then they feed off. Is there an area, or are there more places that now, in the last 10 years, we could have a home base so that we get closer to them and reach a greater number?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: That is definitely outside my purview of authority. I'm sure that will be a decision made by the Government of Canada, where it wants to put patrol groups.

However, let's consider that as we do position patrol groups. How are we going to get access to them? What will be that exchange of information to the member and back to the centre? How does that look? Can we define that first before we go in, all guns ablazing? Can't we just figure out what we want to do in order to make sure we have that connectivity to the community?

Mr. Darrell Samson: Do they have VAC accounts? It might be a silly question, but I know access is difficult. Do they have access in some way, shape or form?

They receive their cheques. Whichever way they receive their cheques, can they receive benefits and information about the benefits? Is there a way we can ensure that they have access to the knowledge and to the information?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Some of it is going to take infrastructure, for sure, bricks and mortar maybe in some places. Most communities do not have a bank. Some will have the community store. One of the local northern chains would be in there. They'll cash a cheque.

Mr. Darrell Samson: If they would pick up a cheque there, would they not be able to pick up information about the services and the benefits? Are we reaching them? They have to go pick up their cheque. Are we trying to get the info to them through that venue?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I don't know if those particular avenues are being followed today. Maybe it's an opportunity, but again, that would only be part of a solution. We can't let that go to an outside entity when it's our responsibility.

I'll go back to it and I'll stay on it. If the Canadian ranger instructor group were large enough, then they could be on the ground. It's their responsibility to tell the members what the Canadian Armed Forces health care benefits are, and their entitlements.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Were you able to take a peek at the recruitment process for both instructors and rangers? Is there an active plan to recruit more now, and to replace those?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I know the intent is to increase the size of the rangers, the entity in itself, to make it larger than it is. There are active campaigns going on. The chief of the defence staff has said he is going to increase the rangers, and all five CRPGs are engaged in one way or another. I don't know their specific plans, but I am sure.

• (1620)

Mr. Darrell Samson: How many rangers are out there?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: There are 5,000 in total.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Are we tracking them? Do we know everything about them?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: No.

Mr. Darrell Samson: We pay them. We should know what they're doing and where they are. We should know their ages and their challenges.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: If we're paying them for having performed a function, we know what the function was and what they were doing. Again, class A is 12 days a year and class B can be more or less than 180 days. It depends on the contract of service they're on, what they're doing and that type of thing.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I read somewhere that they don't want to report, and somebody already touched on that. They don't like to report because of fear they might not get a contract or their time's up or whatnot. Both of you were in there more often. Do you have any comments on that?

Ms. Amanda Hansen-Reeder: That came up for sure.

Another point that was raised when we were talking to the rangers was their reticence to report injuries. They downplay the extent of

the injury. For example, frostbite might be something that we consider to be quite severe, but it might not be considered quite as severe in other communities.

Mr. Darrell Samson: How do we show our appreciation? I read somewhere that some of them are 50 to 60 years in service. What are we doing to recognize them? What process is in place? Can we improve that piece?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: The Canadian Armed Forces do a good job recognizing their members. There's a series of medals, and there are medals for a certain theatre versus another one. The Canadian rangers are part and parcel of that. They're treated the same as others. For exceptional service, there is merit and a reward for that.

I don't know if we need to do anything exceptional. Again, I would like to see more instructors on the ground. Maybe we could do a little more of that.

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC): Gary, thank you for your service over the years.

On page 22 of this September 27 report, you give recommendations. There are four of them, with some subrecommendations under three and four. Have you seen movement on any of these recommendations?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Have we seen movement? The report was submitted to the department as standard operating procedure. All the recommendations were accepted. Talking to the CRPGs and the commanding officers of the CRPGs, they are working towards them.

Could I give you a concrete detailed plan of what that looks like? No, but in general conversation, they're starting with the gist of the recommendations. They're asking, "How do we do this?" I believe there is movement towards getting them implemented.

We've had a tremendous relationship with the Canadian Army. They have been nothing but open, honest and sharing information back and forth. When they saw it, they called it the way they saw it, and I have to thank them for that.

I believe the intent and spirit is behind them, but do they have anything concrete at this point in time that I could give you a Gantt chart on? No, I don't think so.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you.

I'd like to yield the rest of my time to Mr. Martel.

Mr. Richard Martel (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, CPC): I am going to ask my question in French.

[Translation]

You said that it is becoming difficult for Rangers in remote areas to find information about their pay. There is no Internet in some places.

What can be done about that? It surely comes down to money and resources. How can we address this challenge facing Rangers in remote areas? The language must also be a factor. We must find solutions.

[English]

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think there are many solutions.

The Canadian ranger instructors, yet again, are the folks who are left with the responsibility to ensure that members are paid. We not only pay them for their service with us, but if we use their equipment—it's called an equipment usage rate—for the use of a snowmobile while on patrol, that's paid in cash. That is done by the Canadian ranger instructor.

I don't think we're going to build IT infrastructure across the north in the very near future, and I think it's going to come back to having ample resources from the Canadian ranger instructor cadre to be able to do this job.

I'm sorry to come back with one answer, but there are no immediate solutions. There are things we could do to start to relieve the pressure, and I think the Canadian ranger instructors are one of the groups we need to be looking at primarily.

• (1625)

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: So who is able to provide more resources to the Rangers? The government or the Canadian Forces?

[English]

Mr. Gary Walbourne: The responsibility for the rangers clearly falls within the Canadian Armed Forces. The chief of the defence staff determines what the priorities are on staffing and the allocation of resources. That's all within the purview of his authority.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: In your opinion, do the Canadian Forces show a willingness to improve the process for the Rangers? Do they have the financial resources to do so? Money makes the world go round.

[English]

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Well, I'll let you ask the Minister of National Defence if they have the resources.

When I look at the plan to increase the rangers, that comes with a cost behind it. That has been costed forward. Has it been funded? I'm not privy to that information. It comes down again to the priority. That priority is set by Department of National Defence. Once the priority is established, the funding comes in behind it.

Has that happened at this point in time? I don't have visibility on that. Sorry.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: I would like to address the training of the Rangers. Does their training vary according to the area they cover?

Do those in remote areas receive the same general training as all other Rangers? Should training vary from one area to another?

[English]

Mr. Gary Walbourne: It's a bit of both.

Basically the rangers are all the same type; the groups are the same.

Their overarching training and information sharing is the same. There may be anomalies across different CRPGs because of the remoteness of a community or the position of a community, or the activity within that CRPG. There may be different levels of training, dependent on operational tempo, or needs and desires of the department. However, the general macro overview is the same for all rangers.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: I'm curious as to why medical examinations are not mandatory for the Rangers. Is it because of their age or because there is a shortage? Some of them may not be in good physical condition.

[English]

Mr. Gary Walbourne: As I say, when the ranger is elected into the patrol, there is a review of whether the individual is physically and psychologically fit, a series of questions, and watching their physical activity.

I would caution again that rules that work south of 60 don't work so well north of 60.

I'll go back to the response I gave earlier. In that community, it's inherent.... Diabetes starts early. Heart disease comes in early. If we decide that we're going to put them through the same rigours as we do everyone else, you're going to start losing rangers quickly.

I would caution again to make sure that anything we do north of 60 has taken into consideration that community, not only their needs, but their current position.

[Translation]

Mr. Richard Martel: Thank you very much. I appreciate your answers.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Walbourne, Ms. Hynes and Ms. Hansen-Reeder for being here today.

I want to first congratulate Mr. Walbourne on his upcoming retirement. He has served for many years in our public service. Without a doubt, I wish him all the best as he moves on to the next chapter in his life.

Mr. Walbourne, you talked about, in the training of our troops, the values, and the importance of honesty, learning and purpose. Certainly, I believe your office plays an important role to ensure that those values are upheld when we consider our Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. You have in the past spoken up about fairness. You have talked about challenging the status quo.

I had the pleasure of meeting a few rangers who were part of the first patrol group among a group of 1,800 who serve across 60 patrols in Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon. That was when I participated in the Canadian Armed Forces parliamentary program aboard the HMCS *Charlottetown*, which sailed from St. John's up to Iqaluit. It was my first experience meeting the rangers. I was quite impressed with their professionalism and their demonstration of the various activities and functions they perform. I was also very baffled to see, when I went to the area corner store, a bag of chips for \$8 and a bottle of water for \$10. That illustrated to me the challenges of working in the north and the important role that the rangers play.

Going back to your work, what would be one message you could leave us with respect to the rangers? We've talked about a number of things today, including access to medical services and banking in the north. Is there a big message you could leave us with in terms of what needs to be challenged? How can we make better what we are doing in terms of how we serve the rangers? For everything they have done to serve our country, what would that message be?

• (1630)

Mr. Gary Walbourne: The message from me personally would be this: Let's give the ranger instructors the resources they need so that they can go and do what needs to be done on the ground—spending time with their patrols, educating their patrols, and helping them if there should be an illness or injury. It's critical. Just bringing more rangers into the system and not increasing those who manage and oversee that group I think is going to be a grave error.

I have spent a lot of time with the rangers. As I say about every group I spend time with, they're exceptional. They're unique. The sense of pride, the relationships they have, the welcome you receive when you go there—I think those are the attributes we look for in people. I think we already have it. Let's not just give them lip service, though. If we're going to increase the size and put more rangers on the ground because that's the government's desire, then let's make sure we resource it properly. I would hate to be listening to a story three or five years from now where there are 8,000 rangers and the ratio is 1:400. That won't help us at all.

The rangers are a good group. I talked about the elder transfer of knowledge. It is amazing the respect they hold in the community, the sway they have. We need to get in on the ground and talk to the rangers. What are their needs? There will be some expectations that we won't be able to meet, but we should be able to give them at least what we give south of 60.

Mr. Shaun Chen: Unlike our other units of the Canadian Armed Forces, the rangers don't participate in military operations. They are not subject to the same principles that apply there. Can you share with us why that distinction was made, to your understanding, and whether that is working in the context of the work they do?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: First of all, I want to go back and make a point. They do participate in military operations, such as search and rescue, surveillance on the land, those types of things. Those are militarily instructed functions. That puts them into that fray.

To go back to my earlier response, when we look at that community and we look at some of the things that are inherent in that community—diabetes comes to mind quickly, as does heart disease—those things happen much more frequently in that community than they do in others. If we decide that universality of service will be applied, you won't have rangers in the north. This is what I talk about when I say to go to the community and talk to those people. They manage themselves very well. They are very self-sufficient and very able to respond as we demand.

I know there is talk right now. The chief of the defence staff has said they're going to look at universality of service across the board. I think that is a good thing going forward. I think we should allow that to come to fruition. But I don't think imposing, again, a south of 60 policy on north of 60 will help our national security or allow us to grow the rangers at the pace that we would like.

• (1635)

Mr. Shaun Chen: With respect to rangers who are no longer able to perform service because of injury or illness, are they receiving the same supports that are available to veterans through Veterans Affairs Canada? Is there any differentiation in the level of supports and service?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: There is no differentiation in the entitlement, to what they are entitled.

When I look at the statistics, I see that 89% did not know they were able to participate or have access to Veterans Affairs Canada benefits. That tells me I have a problem. They had the same entitlement as any other member of the Canadian Armed Forces depending on the type of contract they were employed on.

The Chair: Mr. Johns, you have three minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns: I will follow up with Mr. Chen's question. We heard testimony from Professor Lackenbauer. He raised the possibility that some Canadian rangers wouldn't be eligible for certain programs under Veterans Affairs Canada.

Can you clarify if Canadian rangers are eligible for the last resort financial assistance provided through the Canadian Forces income support or the veterans emergency fund?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I'm not sure. I'm sorry.

Mr. Gord Johns: Do you know if they are eligible for the education and training benefit?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: As I say, depending on the type of contract they are engaged on—class A, B, C reservists—I would assume they are considered part of the reserve so they would be eligible for the same types of benefits.

Mr. Gord Johns: Ms. Wagantall talked earlier about the ratio of instructors to rangers. Is there a recommended ratio you think we should get to?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: As I said earlier, I think it's going to depend on proximity, operational tempo, the pace. I think those are all going to be deciding factors. I wouldn't step in that lane. I think it's best left for those who work the ground every day to determine what those ratios should be.

Mr. Gord Johns: How do you think we should proceed in doing that? Every region is very different, especially north of 60.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think the first thing we need to start doing is make sure our Canadian ranger instructors are well resourced and they have the ability to get out and take the time to determine what that looks like. It's a job for the chain of command for sure.

Mr. Gord Johns: Members of the rangers are paid on a 12 days per year basis, which is one day a month. How has this workload been established, and what is the average pay for a ranger's day of work? Are you aware?

Mr. Gary Walbourne: That's a class A reserve type of contract. It's a minimum attendance, 12 times a year. Then there are other rangers who will be on class B, less than 180 days, and class B, greater than 180 days.

As for the pay, Robyn....

Ms. Robyn Hynes: The pay depends because there are different ranks within the Canadian rangers as well, but we can provide you with the pay scales of the different ranks afterwards, if that's helpful for you.

Mr. Gord Johns: I know you're going to get a couple of minutes to address us at the end, but is there anything you want to add specifically regarding indigenous veterans? You have 30 seconds probably.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: I think I've said it all.

My caution again is let's make sure we're listening. Let's make sure we don't look at the storefront. Let's go in through the door. Let's talk to people on the ground.

All our information came from actual rangers sitting in a circle, talking to them, and spending time with them. Ski-Doo rides in the middle of winter in Behchoko are a real treat. Ask Robyn. I volunteered her for that. I rode back in a warm van.

Let's not rush through this and put some sugar-coating on it. Let's get on the ground. Let's get the ground crew and find out exactly what the sticking points are, and then make sure we resource it properly. That would be my recommendation to the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

That ends the time for our testimony today. On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you for all you have done for the committee over probably your four to five times being in front of us.

I will turn the floor over to you. You said you would like a minute at the end.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Gary Walbourne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen, as many of you are aware, I've decided to retire from this position as of October 31 of this year. The reasons for this departure are both personal and professional. Therefore, this will likely be the last time I appear before this committee or any parliamentary committee for that matter. Sorry about the smile.

I am proud of the work this office has done over my four and a half years as ombudsman. During this time, we have published 14 reports, as well as a comprehensive submission to the Minister of National Defence on the defence policy review.

Our office has made a difference. Our recommendations are well reflected in "Strong, Secure, Engaged" and in recommendations that your committee and other parliamentary committees have made over that time. Many of the recommendations have been implemented and over time, I'm confident that more will be. I stand behind all of the recommendations I've made over my four and a half years and I am confident that, right now, they are the best way forward.

As I have said quite publicly, some have not been implemented, based on personalities rather than practicality, and this is sad. The second that we let personalities interfere with what is right for those who wear the uniform in service to Canada, we lose the plot.

As I have stated in my farewell message, I have pushed as hard as I can and as hard as I think the system can take. The Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces have my recommendations. They know which ones are implemented and which ones aren't. If personalities are set aside, we'll know what to do with them and the defence community will be better for it. In the end—and I know we will end up where we need to be—the interim years of inaction and a lack of implementation will mean more heartache for our members. Eventually, we will get there. We have no choice.

I remind the incoming ombudsperson, whether that person is acting in this position on an interim basis or is appointed through the regular Governor in Council process, that this is not a popularity contest. Follow the evidence and trust no one. As an office of last resort, when people get to us, it's because they've already been severely chafed by the system and have nowhere else to turn. Impartiality, confidentiality and objectivity are the core tenets of my responsibilities. They are not to be taken lightly and your actions will be observed and judged accordingly. Accountability starts and ends at the top.

Finally and most importantly, I am incredibly proud of the 65 public servants of this office, who serve the defence community on a daily basis. We have members who have been on our team since we turned on the lights 20 years ago this year. They're professional, respectful and devoted to the work they do on a daily basis. I am in awe of their ability to focus on the task at hand and do it with a grace and humility scarcely matched anywhere else in government. To them, I say thank you for everything.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

•(1640)

The Chair: Some pictures need to be taken, so we'll recess for five minutes and then come back in camera for some committee business.

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