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Chair

Mr. Neil Ellis

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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● (1100)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman (Brantford—Brant, CPC)): Welcome, members, to our meeting of May 8.

Before we begin our new study, it was mentioned to me by Sherry that we will not be meeting on Thursday. The Thursday schedule is going to be a Wednesday schedule, and the House of Commons will convene at 2:00 p.m. Many of my colleagues, and perhaps some of you, will be attending Gord Brown's funeral that morning in Gananoque. I know I'll be there, so we're not going to be having a committee meeting this week on Thursday. It has been postponed, and the clerk and analyst will take care of rescheduling the witnesses that we had coming to that meeting.

Welcome to the witnesses. This is the first meeting on the study of needs and issues specific to indigenous veterans. The study topics will include: support offered to indigenous veterans by their communities during their transition process; quality of services offered to indigenous veterans by Veterans Affairs Canada; specific needs of indigenous veterans living in remote areas; specific issues affecting first nations veterans on and off reserve; Métis veterans, Inuit veterans, modern-day indigenous veterans, and indigenous reservists; issues concerning veterans who served in the Canadian Rangers; and treatment of indigenous veterans who served in the Second World War and the Korean war.

We'd like to welcome our first panel for the first hour. We have Dr. Scott Sheffield, associate professor, department of history, University of Fraser Valley in British Columbia. He is an expert in indigenous veterans history.

By video conference from Quebec City, Danny Lafontaine, public relations officer at Association des Vétérans Autochtones du Québec.

Each of you will have 10 minutes for your presentation, which will be followed by rounds of questions.

Dr. Sheffield.

Mr. Scott Sheffield (Associate Professor, Department of History, University of the Fraser Valley, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm Dr. Scott Sheffield. I'm a historian who's been researching and writing about the experience of indigenous peoples in the Second World War since the early 1990s. Because of my work in their military experience, I got swept up in a rising tide of interest in and political awareness of indigenous veterans issues and grievances, particularly for status Indian veterans, regarding benefits from the Second World War and Korea.

As a grad student, I was contracted both by Indian Affairs and DND, and produced preliminary reports for them, exploring some of these issues. I was subsequently hired by the national round table on first nations veterans issues in 2000-01 to produce a final report. Based on the findings of that report, the federal government followed through in 2003 with an apology to first nations veterans and offers of compensation. Subsequent to that, from 2005 to 2012, I worked with the Métis National Council on a study, exploring the experiences and diverse grievances of Métis veterans. So I come to this with a reasonable amount of experience.

More broadly, during the Second World War, approximately more than 4,200 status Indian men and women enlisted, or were conscripted, into all three branches of Canada's armed forces. The numbers for the Korean conflict are less clear, but probably would number in the hundreds. These service men and women served in every branch of the force, and in every theatre in which Canadian Forces were engaged, and were integrated relatively seamlessly without segregation.

For most of them, it was a powerful egalitarian experience, and for many of them, sadly, the first and maybe the last time in their lives they felt respected, and honoured for their character and capacity.

Before the war was over, the federal government was already planning for the transition to peacetime, including provisions for nearly a million demobilizing veterans. Drawing lessons from the inflexible, meagre, and frankly, not-that-successful programs developed after the first world war, the architects of the system managed to craft a wide-ranging, comprehensive, flexible, and generous system of benefits the second time around. The resulting constellation of legislation and programs were organized into, essentially, a three-tiered structure.

The first tier of benefits were designed to be acquired, or applied for, as service people exited the military at demobilization, and were designed, really, to cushion the immediate transition back to civilian life. In particular, at this juncture, the war service gratuity was a key feature, which provided resources to the veterans, depending on length and location of service, that would be paid out at their monthly rate of pay, and usually provided a number of months of ongoing pay after demobilization.

Once veterans returned home, the onus, then, was on them to seek counsel from Veterans Affairs counsellors, and to apply for subsequent levels of benefits, in particular, the tier two level of benefits, which were the main re-establishment benefits programs to help veterans kick-start their post-war lives. There were three mutually exclusive options available at that second tier.

The first one was the re-establishment credit, by far, the most popular. Roughly 80% of Canadian veterans opted for the re-establishment credit. It was equal to the amount they got for their war service gratuity, and could be used to spend on a set list of potential options. After that, you had the Veterans' Land Act for agricultural and other forms of re-establishment, and lastly, training or education.

The third tier of benefits was sort of an eclectic collection available to veterans if applicable to their particular needs, and if they applied. By and large, Veterans Affairs was staffed with returned veterans in the immediate years after the war. They were well trained, and highly motivated, frankly, to advise veterans on the appropriate path for them through this multi-layered structure in order to achieve the best outcomes. By and large, from everything I've seen of the activities of Veterans Affairs in those transitional years, their service was above and beyond.

With that as a background, and given the direction of the study you're undertaking, it seemed to me the most useful thing I could provide would be a sense of factors that negatively affected both the design and the delivery of veterans benefits for indigenous veterans of the Second World War and Korea.

Importantly, the problems in design and delivery did not automatically mean that indigenous veterans received less money than non-indigenous veterans. In some cases it did, but often indigenous veterans may well have received more actual dollars; they just didn't receive the same quality of re-establishment.

● (1105)

The first major challenge is that, overall, the Veterans Charter benefits were predicated on cultural assumptions of settler society. Now, this is pertinent to both status Indian and Métis veterans. The architects designed the programs essentially to build on an individual's pre-war foundations of education, work experience, skills, and maybe capital or land.

For instance, successfully accessing the Veterans' Land Act required previous agricultural experience and was enhanced if you already possessed land. Similarly, one of the third-tier benefits was guaranteed access to your old job if the employer and the job still existed. Well, that was great—if you were employed before you were enlisted. Also, if you wanted to access university training, you needed to have finished your matriculation and have completed high school in order to qualify.

That pre-war foundation was really critical to them making the most of those post-war benefits. Given the marginalized economic and social spaces occupied by indigenous peoples in those interwar years, combined with widespread indigenous land insufficiency and a generally poor access to both education and health care, many first nations and Métis veterans lacked some or all of that pre-war foundation to build on.

That's the first issue.

The second issue deals with reserve lands and the Veterans' Land Act. Generally speaking, status Indian and Métis veterans could access veterans' benefits, at least in theory, equally and without special regulation or provision. The one anomaly in this came in regard to the distinct legal constraints on Indian reserve lands, which were held in trust by the crown for the common use of the particular band. That meant that the director of Indian Affairs did not exercise a clear title and that banks could not seize or foreclose for a forfeited loan on reserve land. Those factors disqualified status Indian veterans who might like to settle with the VLA on reserve. They could not qualify.

The government recognized this, so they created a distinct clause, section 35(a) of the Veterans' Land Act, which made available only a portion of the standard $6,000 loan/grant. If you paid it off in good standing, the last $2,320 would be forgiven. What section 35(a) did was make the $2,320 available as a grant that didn't have to be paid back. This was a good start, but it was not in and of itself enough money to build an economically viable agricultural operation. Indeed, even the $6,000 wasn't, which is why subsequent loan programs were made available under the VLA to help VLA farmers achieve and grow their operations to a point where they could be economically viable.

Nevertheless, the majority of status Indian veterans obtained VLA section 35(a) grants. This is very different from the normal national average. Only about 7% of veterans opted for VLA, so the fact that more than half of status Indians did is I think interesting. One other component of section 35(a) grants allowed veterans to occupy a piece of crown land and also get the $2,320. Roughly 4,000 or so veterans opted for this, many of whom I suspect—though I can't prove it—would have been Métis veterans. They fell into a similar category.

The third issue is the segregation of indigenous veterans from mainstream Veterans Affairs and from fellow veterans. It's a diverse category of different factors. Essentially, many status Indian and Métis veterans were set apart legally, socially, culturally, and physically in the later 1940s and 1950s.

For example, liquor bans on status Indians barred them from entering Legion halls because they served alcohol. That was problematic, because Legion halls were an important node of information for returning veterans, both in the form of information posters and education posters from Veterans Affairs, but also in sharing a beer with fellow veterans and learning about their experiences and the programs they'd accessed. This was cut off from them. Even for those who weren't legally banned, non-status or Métis, social prejudice may have kept some of them from visiting Legion halls, or the remote regions in which they lived many not have had access to a Legion hall.

When status Indian veterans were demobilized, unlike other veterans, they were told to return to their reserve and get information from their Indian agent instead of going to a Veterans Affairs office. Basically what that did is shift the onus for that veteran's re-establishment from the veteran to Indian Affairs. It was a different circumstance for regular veterans.

● (1110)

It was problematic because many Indian agents were overworked. Their offices were understaffed in this time period because of the Depression and the labour crunch during the war years. They weren't trained or adequately knowledgeable to provide effective, constructive advice or even to properly complete forms in a timely manner.

Many status Indians and Métis veterans also lived in quite remote regions. Some of them lived a very mobile existence, physically separated from access to mainstream Veterans Affairs support centres, which were located in urban and rural population centres.

Even for those not physically destined however, there remained cultural and linguistic factors that made access to veterans' programs difficult. Some indigenous veterans were illiterate or had little access to print media or radio where other Veterans Affairs information campaigns were generally distributed, making them relatively irrelevant to them.

For many Métis, their background is one of cultural isolation and self-sufficiency. There was no established custom and practice within these communities of accessing government services about which many remained ignorant, anxious, or suspicious.

The fourth issue is the intrusion of Indian Affairs into the administration of status Indian veterans case files. In the handling of these veterans' personal case files they were disrupted and negatively affected by the role of Indian Affairs and Indian agents in what developed as a sort of separate parallel system of administration for these veterans.

This came in different forms. At its most basic it was an extra layer of bureaucracy between the veteran and their re-establishment benefits. That created delays and frustration for many veterans. Some even gave up in despair after years of effort or settled for less than was their due.

Sadly, the influence of the Indian Affairs branch was much more pervasive and problematic. This agency and its personnel were not neutral agents in their dealings with veterans. They brought a peculiar corporate culture, a potent assimilationist raison d'être that sometimes warped the intent of veterans' benefits and hurt veterans' re-establishment.

For example, I found almost zero evidence that status Indians accessed vocational and university training; a few, but very few. Certainly many would not have qualified because statistically more than 75% of status Indians in between the wars would have achieved grade 1 to 3 level of education. So only a small number, 2% to 3%, would have matriculated and qualified for university, for instance. There were education provisions for high school and they could have accessed them, but there's evidence that they weren't informed about them.

Instead, it seems that often Indian agents, instead of telling veterans what their options were, told them what they thought they should do or what they thought they were capable of, and given the negative prejudices in that era, that often was a very low bar.

The fact that the vast majority of status Indians took a VLA grant I think is also somewhat suspicious, as it was often used by Indian agents to help pay for a house for the veteran. While this might have enhanced the quality of life for veterans in the short term, it was not the purpose of VLA grants. These were not housing grants. They were re-establishment grants, designed to help set somebody up in a career that would sustain them.

Instead, agents used VLA funds essentially to supplement their own inadequate budgets for on-reserve housing, and in some places it went further than that. In the Maritimes, for instance, Indian Affairs had a program of concentration in this time period, trying to move all Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia to two reserves: Shubenacadie and Eskasoni. They would only allow Mi'kmaq veterans to apply for a VLA grant if they agreed to move to one of these two reserves. In this sense the veterans' benefits became a tool, a stick for Indian Affairs to coerce abiding by this policy of concentration.

Some veterans did move there, got a house, but were dissatisfied living away from family and traditional territories and abandoned that house, which meant they got zero benefit from their VLA benefits in the long term.

These are just some examples of a more pervasive atmosphere that stifled and limited status Indian peoples in the 1940s and 1950s. At its core, status Indian veterans' access to benefits was almost entirely dependent on their Indian agent, and on the relationship they had with that person.

● (1115)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, Mr. Sheffield.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Lafontaine for 10 minutes.

● (1120)

Mr. Danny Lafontaine (Public Relations Officer, Association des Vétérans Autochtones du Québec): In reference to what Dr. Sheffield was talking about, here in the province of Quebec, Métis people are not recognized at all by the governments, neither federal or provincial. So basically they have to go through the same system that we have right now at VAC. So we won't even talk about it. I'm a Métis right now who probably will be recognized pretty soon as an aboriginal with the McIvor law and all that because there's a lot of work being done here in Quebec. Métis is not recognized here at all; it's from Ontario out to the west and probably a little bit of the eastern side.

The problem we're having is more like with the satellite reserves right now up north where they don't even have access most of the time to Internet or phones. They go into the forces and they come back, especially the Rangers and all that, and then they have to go through the council band to get any information, and most of these council bands don't even have any info from VAC at all. This is what we're talking about. We have zero coordination between health services on reserves and VAC. I've been talking to a lot of the chief bands right now, and what they're doing is they're taking care of their own vets and everything and basically they don't know what to do. I've been working a lot with Luc O'Bomsawin from Odanak, and not being on any reserve it's hard for me to get into the reserves because they're saying, you're not really an aboriginal guy. I know both of your grandmothers are aboriginal, but you're not aboriginal you're Métis. Basically we're having a hard time getting through to these aboriginal bands here at the 11 nations to get all this info out to our veterans. This is really the main part about it that we're having here in Quebec.

We should inform all reserve health personnel adequately so that they redirect vets through specified programs that we have right now. I know we have a lot of them. I've been working a lot at the round tables with the VAC ministers that we have right now. I worked a lot with Mr. Blaney, and now we're working a lot with Mr. Regan. What we're finding out right now is there's no access to the remote reserves right now up north, because of a lack of phones, lack of Internet, the use of satellite phones. Like Dr. Sheffield was saying, a lot of them don't even know how to write or speak most of the time. Some of the vets are going to go back to the reserves after their training. These guys are trying to talk to their reserve people and they don't even know what to say to them, so basically they just go back to being, as I say, homeless aboriginal guys on their own reserves. Basically that's what it comes to.

The other fact we had is—I don't know if you heard about it—in Montreal we have the most problems right now with homeless veterans, especially indigenous veterans. We did the "Je compte MTL" 2015 and then we did it in 2018, about two weeks ago. I don't have the stats for 2018, but I have the stats for a one-day walk in 2015 for which we had over 6,000 volunteers who walked with me through Montreal. We handed out some papers and they wrote on it who they were, the ones who wanted to. And out of 3,200 homeless people in one day we had 6% who were veterans, which are 188 veterans, and then 6% were aboriginal, and out of those aboriginal there was 22%, which is 42 of them, who were aboriginal homeless veterans. The guys don't want to go back on the reserves because the reserves don't help them out, and so they're having more help on the street in Montreal right now than in their own reserve. Basically those are the problems that we're having right now in Quebec.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Does that wrap up your comments, sir?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Yes, sir.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you so much. We'll enter in to our first round of questions, which is a six-minute round starting with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, gentlemen, for coming today. Your being here is greatly appreciated. I was glad to get the history lesson. I'll admit I have a history with the military and yet I'm learning today more about this than I have in the past. My colleague Cathay Wagantall, who isn't here with us today, she and I did a round table this past summer in Regina and we met with a number of the chiefs and learned even at that point a ton of information. The issue about the land acquisition was totally foreign to me and to her. These are things that this committee definitely needs to hear about and we appreciate your comments.

Mr. Sheffield, your research that you've done, correct me if I'm wrong, is it just up to after the Korean War, or have you come closer to today, modern day, and our UN peacekeepers who were in Cyprus, first nations veterans in Cyprus?

Mr. Scott Sheffield: No, my interest has been primarily the Second World War, and Korea. I've looked through personal case files of those veterans from further into the sixties and seventies, at some of their pension issues and challenges, that sort of thing, and up into more recent times, but I haven't looked at more recent veterans and their experiences.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Right, and without having that research, I'm just wondering if you can comment. Do you see any type of parallel there?

Mr. Lafontaine, you might be able to add to that after we hear from Mr. Sheffield.

Mr. Scott Sheffield: After listening to Mr. Lafontaine, I definitely think that many of the same patterns would have continued, and a lot of this just comes down to lack of connection between what's going on for Indian Affairs, Métis, who are often off the grid in terms of government services generally, and Veterans Affairs. They aren't connecting, and I think that's fairly systemic. I don't think, up until this study, anybody has considered that really, which is quite remarkable.

So yes, I would assume that variations on that theme continue, and as Mr. Lafontaine has suggested, are still endemic today.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Mr. Lafontaine.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: I'm an ex-sergeant from the Canadian Forces, a Métis. I did 21 years in, five missions, and I can guarantee to Mr. Sheffield that whether I was a Métis or not, especially in Quebec...it's disgraceful, you know. You've got to fight all the time.

So basically I took away that part, the Métis thing, and I just said, well, I'll become an ordinary citizen and try to ask for all my stuff through Veterans Affairs. They did a great job with me. Right now I've got PTSD and everything. Anything that's financial, right now, and even with taking care of myself, it all took a long time. I went bankrupt. I had to go through all that stuff, but that's okay. Everything's good for me, right now, but imagine all the work I've done. I do a lot of work right now on the actual “cows' ground”, like, you know,

● (1125)

[*Translation*]

“right in the trenches”

[*English*]

in French.

I'm the recipient of both the VAC commendation—the minister's commendation—and the ombudsman's commendation, not long ago, for the work I've been doing on the ground, and especially what Dr. Sheffield was saying. I didn't write anything. It's mostly all ground work, and basically it's the same thing. It hasn't changed. Fifty, sixty years down the line, it hasn't changed.

In Odanak right now, Luc O'Bomsawin, who is our president, is Abenaki. His uncle went to the Korean War, but he's a white man married to an Indian woman and he lives on Odanak reserve, and it's a complete disaster. He's not getting service at all, and when the VAC comes out, they tell him he's living on the Indian reserve so the reserve should take care of him, but he says no, he's a white man. So imagine, we're still having all these little problems. It's the same thing, in between that.

Basically, as Dr. Sheffield was saying, in the northern part, where it's mostly non-educated people—and you hear it on the news all the time—people are mutilating themselves on some of the reserves, there are a lot of homeless, a lot of everything, so basically this is where we've got to work it out. We need to have direct communication with these reserves. Me, being a Métis, they don't want me in there. They're saying, “No, you're just a Métis. You're like a white man but with red blood.” Basically, that's what they tell me. “You're a white man with red blood.”

If my grandfather had been aboriginal, then I would have been aboriginal, but that's the main thing.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Very quickly, we just completed a study on transition, and I'm hearing a lot of that aspect from transition.

In one word, or a very quick sentence—and I realize I have a short period of time—on transition, what would you see for our first nations today?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: In the northern part, there's no transition at all, because they don't actually have contacts with VAC, and this is where we're trying to get into it but we're being blocked. All these guys on the ground right now, we're being blocked by the chief reserves, basically. They didn't want to hear about it. They just keep it cool, and basically it's a little bit like what Dr. Sheffield was talking about. Some of the money is going back to the reserve instead of to the veterans.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

Moving on to Mr. Bratina, six minutes.

Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much. It's great to have you gentlemen here with us, and our future witnesses as well.

Starting with Mr. Sheffield, there's a famous Canadian novel called *Two Solitudes*, about the English and French. It seems to me there are at least three solitudes, because there's so much that you've brought forward that we're completely unaware of. I shouldn't say “completely”, because I have on my own learned about people like Fred Pegahmagabow, the great sniper in the First World War, and Tom Longboat, who was from the Hamilton area and had excellent war service, and also, of course, about the support from first nations in the War of 1812.

Generally speaking, however, is the first problem here general awareness?

Mr. Scott Sheffield: No question, it is.

Quite frankly, it's leaps and bounds better now than when I first started working on this in the early 1990s. There was significant recognition—public, governmental, and academic—brought to these issues, primarily by first nations veterans organizations that really began campaigning for an assessment of their veterans' experience from the late 1970s.

The Saskatchewan Indian Veterans Association was really leading the charge in that time period. It was because of those efforts through the 1980s and into the 1990s that you got the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples' report on aboriginal veterans in 1994. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples did a major chapter on veterans issues in 1996, and that led to the national round table process that I was part of, which involved first nations veterans organizations, the Assembly of First Nations, DND, Indian Affairs, and Veterans Affairs Canada. Those things have helped.

There are, in fact, indigenous people participating in national and local acts of remembrance, conducting their own acts of remembrance. There's the national aboriginal veterans memorial here in Ottawa. Things have begun to change.

However, in the general public, yes, people remain largely ignorant of almost everything other than that “maybe there were a few Indians who went”. You're right. The famous people—Tommy Prince, Francis Pegahmagabow, and others—tend to be the only ones who people have heard of.

● (1130)

Mr. Bob Bratina: Mr. Lafontaine, could you tell us when you left the service, and observations on your transition experience?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: I left the services in late 2003. In those days, it was really bad. We had a hard time getting transition services. There weren't many of the services that we have today, which is great for transitioning out. Also, as I was telling you, being a Métis in Quebec, you weren't anything at all. They didn't really care about you as an aboriginal person. You were just part of nothing at all.

I can't really talk about the Métis side, but on the aboriginal side I can say, having a lot of friends who live on the reserves, that it was the same thing. It didn't change from what Dr. Sheffield said. It started to change a lot around about 2013 or 2014, when Mr. Blaney was there. He started working on this stuff. Basically, there was nothing at all. I went through bankruptcy, because by the time I started winning.... It took me seven or eight years to get the stuff in.

That's not just the Métis side. It's really the system. The system really changed a lot, though. It should start reflecting on the aboriginal side, but it doesn't right now. Basically, it's doing good on the white man's side, but I find that on the red man's side, as we call it, it's not there.

The problem is not because it's not there; it's the reserves. Anywhere in Canada that I talk with them, the problem is that there's no communication between VAC and the bands, especially the northern bands. That's the problem we're having right now, education.

Mr. Bob Bratina: Mr. Sheffield referred to the egalitarian experience of indigenous veterans with their white comrades, or whatever we want to call that other group. Was that your experience?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Yes, sir. My two grandmothers being aboriginal, they lost their rights and then we won them again in 2009. It's just since 2009, with the McIvor law, that everything changed a lot for me, but not in Quebec. I got my Métis status from Ontario, because my parents come from there. Now I get stuff from Ontario, but not Quebec. That's how bad it is right now. The Government of Quebec and even the Government of Canada don't recognize that at all.

There's only one Métis organization right now, in Maniwaki, that is really recognized. The rest are not recognized right now. That's another little problem we're having, but it's not part of the VAC problem; it's part of the ministry of Indian Affairs.

Mr. Bob Bratina: It sounds to me as though we're being offered some fairly simple solutions. They probably won't be, but the problems, as they're being illustrated today, are very clear.

Lastly, Mr. Lafontaine, do the people on the reserve generally support and understand the trials and tribulations of the indigenous veteran returning to the reserve?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: I'd say that's the case with most of the southern reserves that are more into the cities, such as Kahnawake, Akwesasne, and all these places, as well as Wendake, which I'm close to. However, all the other remote ones that are up north, even where Luc is right now, in Odanak and Wôlinak, people from the band don't know at all what's going on with VAC. They don't know what's going on with the aboriginal side, and basically that's the problem we're having.

With me trying to work in the reserves and being a Métis, which they don't recognize, it's harder to get this information on the ground and the pound thing, because I do a lot of ground work and pound work. Sometimes it's more than even volunteer stuff. They say to me now that I'm a “crazy volunteer”, so I try to get into it. I stay alive doing that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Johns, you have six minutes.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you both for being here and for your really important testimony today.

I'll start with Sergeant Lafontaine, if you could speak a little bit more about outrage. You talked about the high number of homeless veterans in Montreal, and I know VETS Canada does some work, and they have some funding from the federal government to deliver services.

What kinds of services are being delivered to help address those veterans who are living on the street and homeless vets? Can you speak to that a little bit?

● (1135)

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Oh, yes, of course. I'm with the respect campaign, as they call it, now with Mr. Steve Gregory, who is a lieutenant colonel, honorary colonel with the 2nd Field Artillery Regiment.

Basically, it's all civilian people working together to get this thing going. VAC comes in and we tell them it's really nice, all their little programs that invite homeless veterans to come and see them. I actually went to them and asked if they think a homeless person has a phone on him or a tablet, saying, “Okay, I'm going to come out and talk to you guys.” Basically I told them to come and walk with us on Je Compte MTL. They don't come out. I tell them they have to come out and see what's on the street right now. That's what we do. I sleep with them. I did that a few times. That's what I was saying: I'm a crazy volunteer guy on the street and I'll sleep with them and I'll talk with them and I'll take them out. Basically, I'm ruining my own life doing it, but still, it's beautiful because it's giving back to me. But it's okay.

Mr. Gord Johns: I love your continual service to our country, Sergeant Lafontaine.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Thank you very much, Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: When we look at the gaps, what would you like to see to help serve those vets? Obviously these organizations aren't resourced enough to serve the veterans who need it. Do you want to speak to that a little bit, about what we could do?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Yes, basically right now, Mr. Steve Gregory is doing a great job reuniting all these groups, all the groups of homeless that are in Montreal because there are so many of them right now. There's La Maison du Père, there's.... I forget all the names, because there are so many of them. Then we have the City of Montreal that's working with us. There are a lot of people.

The thing is that right now what we're needing is resources, money resources and getting programs in, like one central program where everybody works on that program, so that we could start talking to each other. We're trying to do that, but basically there's money missing. It's not something like...we're not calling for billions of dollars. Probably $1 million would fix most of the problems right now, especially over communication. A million dollars is nothing if we counted 200 or 300 veterans; it's like $10,000 or $20,000 per guy.

Basically if we could start helping them out.... I don't know if you've seen in Calgary and in B.C. right now that they're doing little homeless houses. We're trying to get them. It's a community for veterans, and we're trying to establish this right now in Quebec. We're talking with these people. Usually when you take the vet off the street—this is a true fact, because I've been doing it—when you take the VAC and you give the vet all this help and then you put him in housing with civilian people, he'll go right back into the street. This is their ground, their service thing.

We're doing these little community houses, so there's going to be a community centre where we could get all these veterans, and when they're not doing well, they talk to each other. If they don't want to come and eat, they stay in their little house, and it will work. There's land in Sainte-Anne right now where the hospital was that we lost, which we could get and start doing that. There's a community centre already there; then you have the hospital right beside it. You could have all these people coming in and doing this stuff. We're trying to work on it, but the thing is that we're lacking resources, financial resources.

Mr. Gord Johns: In terms of outreach again, I know you talked about the digital gap that there is, communities where they don't have that, but also a lot of remote communities do have an opportunity for us to do outreach.

I don't know if we're doing that well, and certainly VAC is doing that well using what communication tools we have in terms of outreach.

Also, I know that in the United States 30% of their caseworkers are former veterans. They understand veterans' issues. When it comes to aboriginal veterans, I imagine there are a lot of culturally sensitive protocols and a level of understanding that's necessary. Would you see it beneficial if VAC set clear targets to hire veterans as caseworkers to reach out and do outreach to veterans?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Mr. Johns, you wouldn't even have to really pay people. Some people volunteer, like me, to go on these reserves and talk about it, but they're too scared to lose their jobs.

They're saying I'm going to steal their job. I say, no, I'm not, I'm helping them out to get this contact between each other. I can't even work anymore. I'm doing volunteer work because basically, one day my brain doesn't want to work, but I could help them get into it.

This is the part where we're having a hard time getting into the reserves. Even Mr. Steve Gregory wanted to talk to Mr. Bellegarde, who is the highest guy. He never had a return call. We're saying we want to help those guys out; we got all the resources to help those guys out, but they're not talking to us. So there's a two-way thing going between each other.

● (1140)

Mr. Gord Johns: Well, hopefully we're resourcing people like you.

How much time do I have?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. I'll be really quick.

Sorry, Mr. Sheffield, I have so many questions that I'd love to ask you, too. You did your part of the report in 2000 and 2001. Can you identify some of the calls to action or gaps from that report that haven't been filled?

Mr. Scott Sheffield: I think I would build on what you have just been talking about. One of the things that I noticed in my work for that and work on Métis personnel case files is the difference between the immediate post-war period in terms of VA services and what happens as Veterans Affairs becomes more bureaucratic and less veteran-centric in the 1960s and 1970s. As the service became poor, harder, and mean-spirited, it got much more difficult for veterans. If you could tap into the passion, the commitment, and the dedication of people like Mr. Lafontaine and hire people for Veterans Affairs who have that cultural sensitivity and understanding, I think you would go a huge distance to help close some of those gaps to communication.

Mr. Gord Johns: I couldn't agree more.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

Mr. Samson, you have six minutes.

Mr. Darrell Samson (Sackville—Preston—Chezzetcook, Lib.): Thank you very much, both of you, for your presentations.

I have to be honest that it's a learning curve. We've been dealing with veterans and all the issues around veterans services and benefits, and now we're looking at the indigenous and how they were excluded or lacked services, and the more you learn about it, the more frustrating it is, because indigenous peoples as well as veterans have a lot of catching up to do. I think we're on the right track in general, but when it comes to indigenous people, I'm not so sure.

I guess what I would like to hear from both of you is where are we at today. Today is 2018. What progress have we made in the last 10 years, and what's missing? What should we be working on now? How can we make this system, the transition, better than we've seen? I'm just trying to understand, because we need to submit a report that's going to put recommendations in. What areas are we still lacking, and what solutions do you think we could bring forward?

Again, two or three key things might just help us get where we need to go.

[*Translation*]

Let's hear from Mr. Lafointaine first.

[*English*]

Then we'll go onto Mr. Sheffield.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: I think right now what we're lacking is having these.... I don't want to hit on anybody, but all the chiefs around, the higher chiefs like Mr. Picard here in Quebec.... We need to have these chiefs together with us veterans, indigenous veterans, Métis, all these people, and you guys together to talk at this round table and ask what we can do right now, what are the points, and even having Dr. Sheffield would be great, because he has already had all this part from the past. I have a little bit of the part from now.

I like what you're saying about getting this thing going in the future, not in 10 years and sitting around and saying we've got the same problems again. Basically, this is what we have to do. We have to get the chiefs together with us and say, "Listen, there are problems here". Let's stop trying throwing the ball in everybody's court and get this thing together.

I have a lot of solutions. I'd put a thousand hours in it. I don't care. I'd voluntarily do this round table and get this thing going. I'm a passionate guy to get my veterans, indigenous veterans, Métis veterans, back to school, back to having a right to live, a proper way to live.

Mr. Darrell Samson: The first one would be to have this round table, this group bringing everybody to the table. What would you like to see come from that? If you bring them all around the table, and you have those real serious conversations, what do you think that can bring us? What would be two changes you think would come out of that?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: First of all, this bond between what's missing right now with VAC, with us, the veterans, who are on the street, and the chiefs.... When the higher chiefs sit down to decide and say, "Listen up, guys, we have a problem, and we've got to fix this".... Then from there, all this communication showing their medical people how to organize things.... The vets don't have to go through the medical system there, or if they go through it, they don't have to pay to get the guy to shovel their.... So they're going to be gaining money in their own reserve because they're not using their own money to help a veteran. We're getting money from where we're supposed to be getting on the programs. That's what we're talking about right now.

Mr. Darrell Samson: Thank you.

Mr. Sheffield.

● (1145)

Mr. Scott Sheffield: I think, from my perspective, that the first one is getting together around a table and talking with different stakeholders. One of the things that has too often been the case in indigenous administration in Canada is the government making decisions and rolling out programs without asking or talking to indigenous peoples.

You know what? Including status Indian and other veterans in the Veterans Charter was, for that time, a remarkable act of inclusivity and equality, except no time was taken to consider the potential ramifications if you don't fit that mainstream rural or urban, Anglo-Saxon, or at least European, background.

Just the act of doing what you're doing now is a hugely important step in the right direction. What are the differences? How do we close the gaps? Where are the gaps? Where do the bridges need to be built, and how can we help? Are there special programs, or are the existing programs adequate if we can find ways to effectively enhance their delivery and make them more culturally attuned?

Mr. Darrell Samson: We know there are all kinds of new programs and benefits that have been put in place over the years. Most people don't know about them. I suspect it's even worse, as you said.

Mr. Chairman, how much time do I have left?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You have 45 seconds.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I guess now the question I would focus on is this: in this summit or whatever you want to call it, would we bring the non-reserve with the reserve? What would be the conversation around that piece?

Mr. Scott Sheffield: Do you want to answer that one?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: That would be a hard one, I'm telling you, especially in Quebec.

I know that there's a lot of stuff being done in Ontario with the Métis. There's a lot of good stuff being done there and on the west coast. However, like you're saying, even in Ontario and all that—because I travel a lot and they say that there are no Métis that exist from Ontario to the east—there's a lot of change we have to do in that way too, but we won't change that. It will probably last another hundred years.

What you're talking about is having timelines—not just talking—saying, "We have to do this before this date, and we have to do this before this date," and then just keeping on going at it and getting it done.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm talking also about a veteran. A veteran is a veteran.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Of course.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): I'm going to have to cut it off there, gentlemen. We're a little bit over on that one.

Mr. Darrell Samson: I'm sorry.

Mr. Phil McColeman: That's okay.

Mr. Eyolfson.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, Lib.): Thank you both for coming. We appreciate your testimony.

Sergeant Lafontaine, thank you for your service as well.

One of the things I want to clarify from what you're talking about with your experience here is the issues that you're having in accessing service. You were mentioning what's happening in Quebec. Is this unique to Quebec? Are you finding that veterans like yourself are having a different experience in other provinces?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: I'd say they are more likely as Métis. Basically, I threw that away. I'm a Métis for everything else except for VAC, basically, and for what's on the reserves because the reserves here don't actually recognize the Métis at all. That's a governmental thing. It has been 300 years of problems, and I don't think we'll change that. For that side of the street, it's okay. We're doing good for the Métis and all that, but aboriginal-wise, we have a lot of work to do. I hear it all the time.

The guys go back to their community, and they're homeless in their own community, or they go homeless in Montreal. Basically, that's what it is. It's both ways.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: You're talking about the first nations veterans, that they are having a worse time, as you say, being homeless on the reserves and this sort of thing?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Yes, because, basically, most of the chiefs of the reserves or the people who are there don't even know what's going on. They don't actually know what VAC is, or some of them are actually just ignorant about it. They probably don't even want to know about it. We really have to go.... I say that we have to ground and pound it. That's the problem.

Basically, I'm willing to do with you. Voluntarily, I'll ground and pound in there and get this thing going.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Sure. You mentioned, as well, that in most of your life you're identifying as Métis, but with VAC you're not. I also want to clarify on this: if someone is identified as aboriginal in any capacity, first nation or Métis, and they apply to a VAC service centre, are they receiving the same services if they present, or are they referred somewhere else if they're aboriginal?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: If they're aboriginal, most of the people, especially in the north, don't even come out because it's too far. To get to Service Canada, it's too far.

● (1150)

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I understand that, but do the small number of those who seek these services get the same treatment in the stream?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Oh yes, of course.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: Good. I was hoping that was your answer.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: When we bring them through the system, they become a normal person like everybody else—they become a vet. We're saying a vet is a vet, basically. It's just getting that vet in there. It's not being aboriginal or not, it's getting them out of the reserve. To do that, though, you have to go into that reserve to get these guys.

I actually asked some of the chiefs, “How many vets do you have on your reserve?” They don't know. I'm saying, well, okay, we have a problem already. Like I say, “Houston, we have a problem.” That's what I say, especially on the north part of it. Then if you go into Kahnawake, they have their little own world. It's hard in Quebec. Like I say, we are a distinct society in Quebec.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: You talked about your military record. When did you transition from the military to being a veteran? What year was that?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: It was October 22, 2003. I got out of the forces, but it took almost 12 years to get everything done. I did a bankruptcy, a divorce, everything you could imagine. I attempted suicide in 2009. It doesn't really matter, because that's the past and I'm positive. I got the help. It took that much, but I got the help. Those were the old days. I call it the old days.

Today there's a lot of new stuff and a lot of good stuff that has come out, but there's a lack of communication. Like I was telling you, I see all these nice little programs. For example, if you're homeless, then phone us, and so on. I say, “Come on. How can a homeless guy see this nice advertisement?” Basically, you have to have these ground and pound guys on the floor to get them out.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: I understand.

Have you seen improvements in this issue or in the system in your time, from 2003 to now? Is anything changing or improving that you can see?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Yes, there's a 75% to 80% improvement.

Mr. Doug Eyolfson: What would you say is the biggest improvement you're seeing?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: It would be the physical, mental, and professional rehabilitation, but the problem we're having right now is we're helping the guys to become disabled instead of helping them to go back to work. Basically, right now, we need to say to the guy, “If you get a job for 10 hours a day, instead of cutting you 50% we'll give you another 50% on what you actually have right now.” That way, we're actually getting the guy to start working and having higher self-esteem.

I talked about it with my psychiatrist, and he told me the program we have now is saying to the guy, you don't have to work, because you have a lot of money coming in. That's the little part we should correct for the long term. That's for everybody.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Mr. Viersen, you're next for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our guests for being here. It's much appreciated. Mr. Lafontaine, thank you for your service. We really appreciate it.

Wearing Canada on your shoulder, I'm sure, is something you're very proud of. I've listened to you talk about how people get lost in their own communities. I'm not exactly sure how to word this, but is there any sort of apprehension when you come back, about the fact you have represented Canada on the world stage and worn Canada on your shoulder? When you come back to your own community and there's some suspicion about Canada in general, how does that play out? I don't have any experience with that, other than the fact that I have 14 first nations in my riding, and when I go to visit them there is a suspicion about Canada in general.

As somebody who has worn the uniform, how does that come into this situation?

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: When I wore the uniform, basically in the eighties and the nineties, I didn't even say that I was aboriginal, because you couldn't even go up in the ranks, and all that stuff. There was already something going on there. So, we're talking about 50, 60 years long.

When I came back out, it was lucky I had a French name, Lafontaine, more than anything else. Basically, the problem we're having right now is when they come back to the reserves. It's the bands that don't really recognize all this stuff. Some of them will say, “Oh yes, we're doing that November 11 thing”, and there's a lack... between the Canadian Forces and the bands, too, at the same time.

We've been doing a lot of stuff there in the last three of four years. We have the black bear camps. We're going to be starting a new one. I forget the name. Anyway, one of the names is Carcajou, which is going to be another course that they have, the Eagle Eye thing, and all that. Basically, we're doing a lot of good stuff.

However, especially here in Quebec, right now the problem we're having is these chiefs and bands let VAC come in and do their job to give these veterans the help they need. This is where that mentality has to change.

● (1155)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: That's the suspicion I'm talking about of the first nations bands for something that says “Canada” on it, essentially.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: No, I wouldn't say that at all. I'd say most of the chiefs in Quebec are proud to be Canadians. I know they're proud to be Canadians.

I don't know how it works on the west coast or in parts of Ontario, but I'd say that here in Quebec the problem is that they are fighting against each other. Instead of working together, most of the bands are just fighting against each other. They should be working in unison. I always say that you're stronger reunited than trying to conquer divided. Some people just try to conquer instead of winning the game, or winning the war, as I always say. Basically that's the problem we're having. It's just that communication thing. We were talking a while ago with Mr. Eyolfson, saying that we should work together, get these things going, have timetables—by October, we have to do this—and then work it out. I know we can do it.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you so much for your service, and your passion on this issue for sure.

Mr. Danny Lafontaine: Thank you very much, sir.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Professor Sheffield, do you have any comments about that, maybe from a more historical perspective?

Mr. Scott Sheffield: Yes, I think really what you're dealing with is a long track record. The issues of distrust aren't new. These are deeply entrenched from years of.... I think for many of the bands that we're talking about here, their interaction with government is primarily INAC, and has been primarily INAC; and therefore, when dealing with other departments, there's a presumption of suspicion, even before they enter the community, and a lack of familiarity. That is already an impediment to working effectively with the communities themselves. And that's very much long-standing. I think it's something that will be a challenge to address and negotiate through.

I think part of the problem with Veterans Affairs is this assumption that if you build it, they will come. In this case, you have to go to them. I think that is a real change of mindset in order to more successfully deliver programs and to maybe build some bridges of trust.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you, Mr. Viersen. I'm cutting you off a little short.

I'd like to say this to the witnesses. You've been incredibly good witnesses today to begin our study, and I want to take time to thank you, on behalf of the committee, for doing that. You're both not only very passionate but also very much experts in your areas of work. Thank you so much for kicking off this historic study, I believe, of this committee to undertake this specific issue. We really appreciate your time today.

We're going to suspend for a short time so that we can change our witnesses for the second hour, and then we'll resume.

● (1155)

(Pause)

● (1205)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Committee members, this is the second half of our meeting and we're welcoming two more witnesses for this first day of our study.

First, I would like to introduce Steven Ross. He's the Grand Chief of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association. Steven was elected to serve as the Grand Chief on March 31, 2015. He has been active in the association for over 15 years.

Mr. Ross served for the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. His tour of duty included United Nations peacekeeping duty in Cyprus. Mr. Ross holds a Bachelor of Arts degree and an associate administration diploma from SIFC. He is the chief of the Elder's Council and chair of the General Band Assemblies for the Montreal Lake Cree Nation. He is a member of the Saskatchewan chapter of the Aboriginal Finance Officers Association, he sits as a member of the Montreal Lake Business Ventures Board, and for the past 15 years, he has owned SR Proprietor, a property rental service based in Prince Albert that serves first nations clients with housing needs. He has also been in the trucking industry, with his own tractor-trailer, for a number of years.

Mr. Ross has served as a band councillor for the Montreal Lake Cree Nation for 25 years, with portfolio assignments including education, housing, and economic development. He has worked as band administrator for 10 years and he has managed many band businesses including store manager, restaurant manager, and convenience store owner. Steven has been very committed to his role as grand chief.

Welcome, sir.

Second, we welcome Emile Highway, who is the president of the Prince Albert branch of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association.

Emile Highway grew up in Southend, Saskatchewan and at the Guy Hill residential school. He is a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. He joined the armed forces in 1962 and completed his basic training with the Queen's Own Rifles. He later transferred to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and then to the 3rd Canadian Mechanized Commando, serving a total of 10 years in post-war Germany with those outfits.

In 1977, hoping to increase his career training, Emile transferred to the Royal Canadian Engineers, where he advanced his education, retiring from the armed forces after 20 years of service in 1982.

During his service, Emile earned the European Medal, the Peacekeeping Medal, the NATO and Saskatchewan medals, and the Canadian Decoration.

Gentlemen, first of all, thank you for your service over the years and welcome to our committee. You will each have 10 minutes for your opening statements and we'll follow that by rounds of questions.

Who would like to go first?

Mr. Ross?

● (1210)

Grand Chief Steven Ross (Grand Chief, Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association): I can start. To start off, I just want to say that you mentioned all my credentials there, but you missed that I was a black star ninja.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): How did we miss that?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: Thank you very much for this opportunity to be here today. I greatly appreciate it. We do have a lot of stories to tell. We have many things to say. I also want to say that our stories are not noble sometimes. Our stories are filled with hardship sometimes. As I travel around and meet other veterans, I realize that we all have the same things in common—we were in basic, we were in training, we were in the fields, and we went through the same things that everybody does. After a few years in the armed forces, you get to have good friends. I still communicate with friends of mine from 1965 in B.C., two friends of mine. That's the introduction.

Regarding World War I and World War II first nations veterans, all first nations veterans are living in past historical grievance over land promised to returning veterans. Many Canadian soldiers were given a parcel of land upon their return from these historical battles. The property gifted to veterans has been passed on to living family members, but first nations veterans were not given the same treatment as other Canadian soldiers. These first nations veterans have repeatedly advocated for the same benefits upon return from the war.

Saskatchewan veterans organized and started the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations in the early fifties as a way to fight against the unfair treatment they received during and after the wars. I have a booklet here entitled, “We Answered the Call”. It was done by our staff members and there's a lot of information so I'll leave it with you.

● (1215)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Chief Ross, I'd like to ask you to speak slightly slower because our translators are having some difficulty keeping up.

Grand Chief Steven Ross: It's my Cree.

A process was put in place whereby each first nations veteran was given a sum of $20,000 in compensation. First nations veterans were given land parcels already allocated within the already identified reserve status land communal property, which they could not claim or pass on to family as it is reserved land for Indians. Mental and physical support services for these war veterans are close to non-existent. Many of these returning soldiers turned to alcohol to deal with PTSD.

We recommend a review of this land compensation for returning first nations veterans and a compensation package be identified, based on realistic market value of the land. First nations veterans were identified as being incapable of farming by the Indian agent and were, therefore, denied any parcel of land. The Indian agents had no authority to make this determination on behalf of Veteran Affairs and the Government of Canada. It has caused great hardship for some first nations veterans.

We recommend a formal apology be given to the veterans and their families for the inequity of treatment and benefits paid to veterans and widows. We want an apology issued for the poor administration of veterans' benefits that were subject to the discretion of the Indian Affairs branch and the biases of the Indian agents.

Many returning first nations veterans have no culturally relevant support or wellness programs. There are no traceable documentation trails to monitor the mental and physical health supports utilized by the first nations veterans. We are interested to know exactly how many use mental health support services, how many need psychiatric services, and how many require ongoing physical health support services.

Many veterans today have symptoms of PTSD resulting from service in contemporary duties in the Middle East. We are unsure of how many receive support services upon returning home. We need to look at alternatives to document the services received by first nations veterans.

Currently we are unaware of any support services offered to indigenous veterans by the communities during their transition process. Maybe some communities do offer support, but no data is available to make this determination.

Through the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association we offer membership to veterans who have their release papers. The Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association brings a sense of belonging, and through it, gives great support to be together as an association. Great reverence is given to the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association from the first nations political leadership, honoured in cultural traditions such as the powwow, which recognizes these veterans as a warrior society. This is a prestigious honour given to the veterans and widows of veterans through tradition and ceremony. The Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association does not provide any type of services for physical and mental health wellness.

Regarding the quality of services received by indigenous veterans, the services may be there, and may be utilized by indigenous veterans, but we are unaware of the percentage of veterans accessing these services and the types of services being requested and provided.

● (1220)

The creation of an indigenous veterans affairs unit would assist us in gathering this type of data, determine the quality and effectiveness of services, types of services required, and number of veterans requiring services. With this unit, we will have knowledge of the types and levels of services required.

In terms of indigenous veterans living in remote areas, we can't identify any special supports for them as they access services available for all remote community members, i.e. community health centres. In the creation of an indigenous all-nations veterans wellness centre, Internet and call-in supports can be in place to service veterans living in remote areas.

For specific issues facing veterans living on and off reserve, no data is available to make this determination. Many veterans are unaware of the services available, and how to access them. They are unaware of the benefits they may be entitled to for hearing loss, or injuries sustained by parachuting, training, or battle. Service support inquiries to Veteran Affairs are not handled in a manner beneficial and satisfactory to first nations veterans. Legions are not welcoming to first nations veterans for reasons that could possibly be racist. This further alienates first nations veterans.

I have some recommendations: that a study be conducted for an all-nations veterans wellness facility that has in-house treatment for returning vets, and that will house culturally relevant support services, contemporary health support services, and a first-of-its-kind aboriginal veterans affairs unit; that supports be identified, documented, evaluated, and modified to provide these services; that funding be made available for the construction of the facility and support for operating such facilities; that operational support be provided for the development and creation of an aboriginal veterans affairs unit; that services be made available for first nations Rangers and RCMP veterans through this all-nation wellness centre; that there be support for an annual national indigenous veterans assembly to bring support and comparison of services that are relevant, effective, and efficient to serving indigenous veterans; that there be funding for annual operations of first nations veterans associations across Canada, including office rental, staffing, and equipment; and that there be support services for widows and families.

That is what I have.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you very much for your testimony, Chief Ross.

Mr. Highway, for 10 minutes, please.

Mr. Emile Highway (President, Prince Albert Branch, Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association): Thank you very much. I want to thank the committee for being here. As far as I'm concerned, it's good to be here.

It's a very encouraging sign that the gap we've been talking about for quite a while is maybe beginning to close. Hopefully, we can communicate a little bit better, and the aboriginal veterans, particularly from the north where I come from, will be notified of any changes or any improvements that may be forthcoming in their lives.

I was talking to Professor Sheffield outside in the hallway prior to coming in here, I want to mention something that happens in transition. From my personal experience, I didn't feel comfortable in talking to former military personnel or the Veterans Affairs department. I didn't want anything to do with the uniform anymore. I didn't own any weapons, rifles, hunting rifles, or anything for about 10 years. I completely wanted to isolate myself from that culture. Why was that? I'm not particularly sure. It may have had something to do with two of my friends being killed right beside me.

I will always remember them, McAlpine and Errington. They weren't native, but they were buddies of mine. I ended up in a British Military Hospital, in Iserlohn back in 1965. I was given last rites, and so on, and almost died from the experience. It was a sudden and violent experience. I mention that for a reason. For the Afghan veterans who are returning, or will return, from Afghanistan, the mission is not over. They have been provided many programs, and a lot of support that we in the 1950s and 1960s weren't even aware of, much less received.

First of all, the new programs and services that I'm talking about are in education and training benefits, funds for the payment of tuition. Did we get those? No, we didn't, at least not when I retired from the military. We weren't even aware of career transition services to include a search for a civilian job, writing a resumé, interview skills, and so on. I distinctly remember asking one of my superiors, in 1982, upon release, if he would help me with a resumé. He simply snickered and walked away. That was as far as the support I received at that time.

We didn't receive any support from veterans family programs for caregivers, recognition benefits, etc. For example, maintenance of home and yards, I believe people who are retired now are getting these benefits when they apply. I recently became aware of that. Rehab services and vocational assistance, as far as I was concerned, I wasn't even aware of those things.

I was born in Southend. It's a northern reserve near Reindeer Lake. I'm a veteran from the north, as far north as you can get.

● (1225)

I think I'm unique in that respect. I'm not patting myself on the back or anything, but there are not very many people who come from the northern reserves. I think there are three of them who come from the Athabasca region, the Dene people, and from the Peter Ballantyne band, my band, I think there are about eight of us.

With regard to people being aware of veterans from the north, chiefs included, I don't know if I should say it's not their fault, but they're certainly not aware of the sacrifices and ordeals that we went through as soldiers. With the northern chiefs, there's absolutely no support.

The Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association, which was formed in 1972, attempts to bring awareness to the contributions made to Canadian society by first nations people. As president of the Prince Albert branch, that is my primary purpose. I'm very interested and very passionate about this, because once I got involved with the SFNVA, I really got into it. I felt...not so much that it was unfair, but I guess I wanted people to become aware.

I think what motivated me was Tommy Prince. One time I was here in Ottawa, and I don't know what Tommy Prince wanted or what his request was, but a politician told him that our people will never make any significant contributions to the progress of this country. That man said that to a war hero, the most decorated aboriginal veteran from Indian country.

I never met Tommy Prince, but I've met his nephew. When I heard that, I thought that was so...I don't know if I should use the word ignorant, but it was so insensitive. It was so unfair. A man who had probably never picked up a weapon and stood on the wall would say something like that to a man like Tommy Prince. I decided then and there that I would become involved and try to do something about the experiences, bring the numbers to people, and make them aware of the contributions that aboriginal people made to this country.

One thing I want to mention too is that a lot of aboriginal veterans in the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, and various peacekeeping missions all over the globe, fought valiantly under a flag that didn't always protect them. When I came back, even my own people, at least on two instances, called me a traitor, because I had been in a white man's army and then I went back to my reserve.

Some of the experiences I guess are unique, but what I said to these people is that I don't hold it against them for not having served this country or not having worn the uniform. If anything, I feel a little sorry for them, because they will never know the joy that the men and the women felt in their hearts for having worn the uniform and defending the rights of this country.

They did it for one reason and one reason only, for the land, for mother earth—at least in our case. Every chance I get...when I heard about this committee and I got a call from Karine, I thought I have to go. I have to go and at least say my piece.

I don't have any notes. I don't have anything in order. I prefer to maybe be a little...what's the word, scattered or unorganized when I speak about my experiences and attempt to present the case of other aboriginal veterans.

● (1230)

There are so many things that I could have written down. It would probably have taken longer than 10 minutes to do the presentation.

I'm here with gratitude in my heart for everybody who is present and is making an attempt—an honest attempt, hopefully—to do something to close that gap between Ottawa, let's say, and the reserves and the aboriginal soldiers who did serve this country.

Thank you very much.

● (1235)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you for your words, sir.

We will go to the first round with Mr. Kitchen.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you, Mr. Chair and gentlemen.

Chief Ross and Mr. Highway, thanks to both of you both for coming today. Thank you for your service to Canada. I hope we will meet again at Cowessess this year and dance again at powwow.

It's interesting, your conversation, in that we've just finished a study on transition. We've looked at transition from the point of view of transitioning soldiers—veterans—into civilian life. What we probably didn't look at or realize was that our first nations veterans have to transition from being soldiers into civilian life, but also into civilian life back into first nations and onto the reserves. Sometimes there's that challenge.

We heard from Mr. Lafontaine in the hour before this. He talked about some of these issues up in the remote areas of Quebec and how veterans are having troubles. Basically, the question is, are they getting the information they need?

I know that both of you are from Saskatchewan. I'm from Saskatchewan. We understand the remoteness of our north. I'm wondering if you could comment on that challenge. I don't know if you heard what Mr. Lafontaine talked about, but is there that challenge for our first nations veterans as they transition back into northern Saskatchewan?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: I believe the challenge is still there.

It also depends on how old the veteran is when they leave the armed forces. The older you are, the more experienced you are, and the more mature you are. You can assist your people, your first nation, in that manner, because they look at you differently now. With your experience—your global experience, I guess—you're a different person than you were when you left.

They want that kind of person to be counselling our young people. That's what I see in some areas. The younger people are in a much more different situation here, where some of them—and I think many more—are coming out with that PTSD as well. That's something I don't understand, but I know they're having problems adjusting, and they're having problems finding employment and taking classes. Those are the people who really need help now.

When I left in 1968, I went directly from the armed forces to construction in Calgary. I worked there for a while. After a couple of years, I went back to the reserve. I worked there for a while as well, as a labourer, until I finally saw the light and went back to school and to university. After university, it was a whole new world. It was a whole new world for me.

There are different circumstances for different people as well.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

Emile.

Mr. Emile Highway: If I understand your question correctly, I hope I can answer it. I think a lot of.... I think it's political, and maybe it's a solution between Veterans Affairs Canada and the chiefs themselves, within the reserves. Maybe they can get together.

Also, as the president or the executive members of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association, maybe we're not doing enough speaking in schools and during band meetings and meetings of chiefs and councils. Maybe we could do that, but I don't think it's only us who have to do that as former soldiers from aboriginal communities. I think Veterans Affairs Canada can do more to communicate directly with chiefs and councils.

● (1240)

Mr. Robert Kitchen: The previous group also did mention a similar concept of getting groups together, getting Veterans Affairs and the chiefs together. That's what I think I'm hearing you saying, similarly along those lines.

Mr. Emile Highway: Yes.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Thank you.

How much time do I have?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): You have about 45 seconds.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay.

Just very quickly, in Saskatchewan do we know how many veterans we have on reserves right now?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: We don't have the exact number. We're probably looking at 125 or 150.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Would most of them be from WW II and Korea, or would there be some from Afghanistan, Bosnia, or other...?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: They're mostly from peacekeeping duties. We have three veterans of World War II, in their eighties.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: I can't remember if I asked you when I saw you last. When were you in Cypress?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: It was 1967.

Mr. Robert Kitchen: Okay, that was the same time my father was there. I think we did talk about that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you.

We've moving on to Madam Lambropoulos.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you for being with us today to answer our questions.

My first question is for Chief Ross.

I know you mentioned that the programs available right now are through VAC, Veterans Affairs Canada, and they're not culturally relative programs. Can you give us some examples of programs you would suggest? What do you think can help indigenous veterans get back on their feet? What are specific programs you think VAC can create that are more culturally relative?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: I think there are a lot of things that can happen, but the problem is where the veterans need to go for assistance. Where do they go now to apply for assistance? That seems to be the problem right now.

Veterans Affairs reopened a couple of offices in Saskatchewan, I think, and we're not quite sure exactly where they are. We need to work more closely with them, but if the services can't be accessed, the problem is still there. We need to work with the veterans and with Veterans Affairs so that we can determine exactly what the needs are.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay.

How do you think the government can more successfully reach out to the veterans who are in the northern communities, or the ones who don't necessarily know about the options available for them? Would you have any suggestions on how we can go about reaching out to this population?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: Yes. Our veterans are all over Saskatchewan and there are branches of the Legion across the province as well. Some of them will go to the Legion, but in the Legions a lot of the people are civilians and they don't fully understand a veteran. He is a veteran, he is a veteran—that's what I heard this morning—and that's exactly what it is. Sometimes we get turned away.

We had a young fellow coming in from Afghanistan in Prince Albert. He went to the Legion with PTSD and they turned him away, telling him to go to the Indian organization, go to the Saskatchewan veterans association.

We seem to be able to connect with them. We know where they are, we know their reserves, and we know their leaders. If we can connect with them a little bit more....

Of course there is always that setback that we have, and it's finances, and that's the biggest problem we have.

● (1245)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay.

Emile, can you add to that as well, because you said that you're also from a very northern community? In what ways do you think we can reach out? What would be the best way to make people aware of what services they can get?

Mr. Emile Highway: They could come through the Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association executive, and we'll get to them.

But we'll need gas money. The distances are great. My responsibilities include the Athabasca region, and it's $600 from Prince Albert to Stony Rapids by plane. We get some contributions from the FSIN. A little bit, I think, we get from the government. We do our own fundraising. We raffle Ski-Doos. We make hockey pool. This is a good time of year. The Stanley Cup playoffs are on. Hopefully the Winnipeg Jets will do better tomorrow. They do sell, $20 a square. We split with the winners. It's $1,000 for the winner and $1,000 for the association. We do things like that. It's a hardscrabble way to try to survive as an association.

I think it would be a good way to do it. Just call us, and we'll get to these people.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Can you name the association again?

Mr. Emile Highway: It's the Saskatchewan First Nation Veterans Association.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: All right. Sorry.

I just wanted to apologize for the awful words that have been said by past politicians about first nations people. It's absolutely disgusting. I know that our government is committed to improving the relationship and getting us back there. I know there's so much work to be done. I think this committee really does have the best intentions at heart to improve the situation for indigenous veterans.

That's all for me.

Mr. Emile Highway: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thanks very much.

We'll move onto Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: Thank you, Grand Chief Ross, for being here and Mr. Highway, for your important testimony.

Maybe I'll start with Grand Chief Ross.

You spoke about how this is not culturally relevant, this support that you're getting for aboriginal veterans. There's no monitoring and data.

Do you want to speak a little bit about what could be done to help address that?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: I guess, you know, we've discussed this over and over and over again. One of the things that we want to do is—and we almost got it started—to start up a hospital, a service provided to the young people who are coming out of service, out of the armed services. That's one of the things that we want to do. I think that would help quite a few people with the symptoms of PTSD.

Like I said earlier, it's something that I really don't know much about.

What else? Did I answer your question?

Mr. Gord Johns: Yes.

I was actually going to go there because you talked about the facility, and what that facility would look like. It's something that's being talked about right now in the news, about more research or both, with a facility that's also there to serve veterans.

Would you see a stand-alone facility for aboriginal veterans that has cultural training and something that helps bridge the gap?

I know, Mr. Highway, you talked a little bit about how when you came out, you just weren't comfortable speaking with anyone in uniform.

Would that benefit, do you think, veterans, having a stand-alone facility targeted and tailored for veterans?

● (1250)

Mr. Emile Highway: You know, that's a very good question, having culturally relevant programs for aboriginal soldiers returning or being in transition back to civilian life. I think that's a very good question. I think that someday that would need to be discussed among, say, the executive or maybe at the annual general assembly that we have usually in March. We're trying to have them twice a year. Again, due to shortage of money, we don't.

It is a very important question. It's a highly relevant question. I think it's something that we need to bring to our membership to be able to answer that intelligently or be coherent about what we do need as returning aboriginal veterans. Of course, in the general membership, we have associated members who are elders. I think that would be very beneficial if we could consult them first before we could actually come forward with some kind of a proposal.

Mr. Gord Johns: One thing I talked about earlier with the previous witnesses, and it's something I've raised a lot, is that 30% of the caseworkers in the United States are former veterans. Would it benefit aboriginal veterans to have 2.5% of caseworkers be veterans? Looking at the numbers 125 to 150, if we look at a ratio that Veterans Affairs Canada has targeted at 25:1, that would mean five or six officers just in Saskatchewan of aboriginal background who would be able to serve veterans.

I think just in terms of the model right now selling squares, I'm worried the Jets might not make it another round.

I just think it should be properly resourced by the Government of Canada, not just paying for gas and travel, but paying people to do the work. Do you think that it would be important for the government to set targets and try to hire veterans so that they're fulfilling those roles?

I'll let you both speak to that.

Grand Chief Steven Ross: Yes, I think that's a good idea. You're doing a good job.

The biggest problem—and it's always a problem—is finances. Also, on the way in which we contact Veterans Affairs, our proposal is to try to get a separate unit within Veterans Affairs that deals with aboriginal veterans. I think that it would be smoother and quicker if that was attempted just for communication, and we can get to those people who are in remote areas as well.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you very much.

We'll move on to Mr. Fraser to finish up this meeting.

Mr. Colin Fraser (West Nova, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Gentlemen, thank you both very much for being here and for the good work you're doing in Saskatchewan. It's really appreciated. Your testimony here today will, I'm sure, lead to some recommendations that we can make to the government to ensure that indigenous veterans are getting better services and more recognition for the incredible military service that indigenous people have given to our country.

Mr. Highway, I'll start with you. You mentioned some of the new programs that are now in place for veterans that were not available when you left the forces back in the 1960s, or whenever it was you were in the service and then left.

You mentioned education and training benefit, help with resumé writing, career assistance, help for families, and the caregiver recognition benefit. All of this is important work. Is there any difference that you see with the delivery of those types of services for indigenous veterans in particular that we should be aware of? Do you think it's just as important to make sure that every person, whether they are an indigenous person living on reserve, off reserve, or Métis, is aware of those services? Do you think there's any difference in how the government should be delivering those services to indigenous people?

Mr. Emile Highway: There probably is. Really, I cannot exactly put my finger on what it could be, because I think, if we were to deliver those services straight across the board and lump aboriginal veterans with the rest, then we maybe miss something in there that would benefit the aboriginal people. That's something that I think needs to be examined to take a close look at it.

There's something there that I can't quite put my finger on. I think if we were just to treat these programs and deliver them.... What's the word, generically?

● (1255)

Mr. Colin Fraser: Yes, exactly.

Mr. Emile Highway: I think we would miss something there. I think we wouldn't be advancing forward as an association or you as a committee. I think there's something there that needs to be examined.

Mr. Colin Fraser: If the Department of Veterans Affairs consulted with your organization, for example, and others across the country to find out how they could improve that service delivery model to indigenous veterans, do you think that would be welcomed by your association?

Mr. Emile Highway: Absolutely.

Mr. Colin Fraser: With regard to the veterans offices that have now reopened across the country, I understand one has reopened in Saskatoon. Does that office serve veterans throughout Saskatchewan?

Mr. Emile Highway: Yes, as far as we're aware. We're very appreciative that it reopened.

Mr. Colin Fraser: What's your view of how that office is performing right now, as far as its service delivery to veterans in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Emile Highway: I believe it is required. I think more aboriginal veterans should be made aware of the existence of that office in Saskatoon, so they can access what the office is doing to help them fill out application forms and answer any questions they might have. I think it's necessary that it be there.

Mr. Colin Fraser: It should proactively make sure they are getting the services and programs they are entitled to, rather than sitting back and waiting for indigenous veterans to come to them. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Emile Highway: Yes.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Chief Ross, is there a difference in how services are accessed by indigenous veterans living on reserve or off reserve? Is there a relationship between VAC with any bands, for example, in Saskatchewan, and how they deliver their services?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: I don't think there's a difference. I think the problem for first nations veterans, wherever they might be, is knowing where to go. There's an office in Saskatoon, and that should be where they are going, but at the same time, the office doesn't know where the veterans are. That's one of the problems: communication and direction.

But there is no difference that I'm aware of.

Mr. Colin Fraser: Mr. Highway, you spoke about the recognition of veterans and the incredible service of indigenous peoples in our armed forces. I note that throughout our history of World War I and World War II, the amazing gallantry of our indigenous veterans is incredible. We need to make sure that story is being told to our next generation. I think an important way to do that is to ensure we are better recognizing and celebrating the history of indigenous veterans.

Is there something you would specifically recommend to the government as to how we can better recognize the service that indigenous peoples have played in our forces? If so, what would that be?

Grand Chief Steven Ross: There could be a number of things. We're working on things in Saskatchewan to be more visible as first nations veterans. We get involved in parades. We have a float in the Saskatoon parade. We have a float in the Fort Qu'Appelle parade. That's being more visible to the next level. We're also working on a monument for the Saskatchewan First Nations University of Canada. It will take quite a while, but those are the things we're trying to do.

I'm not good at asking, but.... When our first nations veterans pass to the next world, we provide a semi-military funeral. We feel they deserve it. Nobody has ever done that for them before, and we feel it's our duty to provide that service for them. It's good for the family, for the community, and it's good for everybody.

● (1300)

Mr. Colin Fraser: Thank you both very much.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Thank you both for travelling here and for taking your time to come to this committee to give us the words you have today. I'm sure they are going to be very meaningful in terms of the report we will write. You will get a copy of that report when we complete it. Thank you so much on behalf of the committee.

Colleagues, just a reminder that there is not going to be a meeting this Thursday.

Mr. Johns, we're out of time. Can I have unanimous consent to extend the meeting for Mr. Johns?

Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Gord Johns: I just need one minute; this will be really brief.

I wanted to see whether everyone was agreeable to adding another witness, a gentleman named Ricardo Manmohan. He does a Rangers program with Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation on the west coast. It's phenomenal, groundbreaking. He's been doing it for a couple of years, and now other nations have asked him to deliver the program.

I just wanted to see whether we could add him to the list for witnesses. I think it would be a benefit to all of us. He's non-partisan all the way, a great witness.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Very quickly, are there any objections?

Some hon. members: No.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Phil McColeman): Seeing none, we will add him.

The meeting is adjourned.