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Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 111 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motions adopted by the committee on March 9 and December 5, 2023, the committee is resuming its study of the recognition of Persian Gulf veterans and wartime service.

Today's meeting is taking place in hybrid format. Remember that comments must be addressed through the chair.

[English]

For the first hour, I have the honour to introduce the Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Veterans Affairs.

[Translation]

She's joined by Paul Ledwell, deputy minister, and Mitch Freeman, director general, policy and research. They both come from Veterans Affairs.

I would like to welcome the three of you.

Minister, you have five minutes for your opening remarks. The members of Parliament will then ask you questions.

Minister, you have the floor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Minister of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I also want to promise you that I'll speak slowly.

The Chair: Sorry, but I must interrupt.

[English]

Mr. May, do you have a problem with translation?

Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.): I beg your pardon, Mr. Chair. It might be just mine, but I could not hear any translation at all.

[Translation]

The Chair: Do you have access to the interpretation now, while I'm speaking in French?

[English]

Mr. Bryan May: No.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Make sure the sound is very loud.

Mr. Bryan May: It's as high as it will go.

You can continue. It's just me.

The Chair: Okay, but you're important.

I'm sorry, Minister. Please start again.

[Translation]

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Once again, I promise that I'll try to speak slowly to make things easier for the interpreters.

[English]

Thank you so much for the invitation to appear before committee today.

To begin, let me first say that our government is grateful for the dedicated service of all Canadian members of the Canadian Armed Forces and veterans, including those who served in the Persian Gulf from 1990 to 1991. More than 4,000 Canadians were part of the international coalition of nations that fought to return freedom to the people of Kuwait.

[Translation]

Over 30 years later, we recognize that many military members have paid a heavy price for serving under such stressful conditions.

In terms of recognition, we understand that some Persian Gulf veterans are wondering about the designation of their service in this conflict.

[English]

Under the current legislative framework and designation practices within the CAF, the Persian Gulf is designated as the highest level of risk, a special duty area.

Throughout the years, veterans shared that the programs delivered under the Pension Act were no longer meeting the needs of modern-day CAF veterans and their families.

Changing demographics coupled with the need to respond to the changing needs of modern-day veterans prompted a replacement of the Pension Act in 2006, which was supported by all parties in the House of Commons at the time.

The new veterans charter, later called the Veterans Well-being Act, provides comprehensive rehabilitation, medical, psychosocial and vocational support, financial benefits, disability benefits, career transition services, access to the public service health care plan, and one-on-one case management for the most complex cases.

While the Pension Act addressed the needs of veterans through a single method of support, the disability pension, the Veterans Well-being Act was designed to provide a more varied suite of benefits in order to meet veterans where they were in terms of post-service needs.

Whereas most First and Second World War veterans were leaving the military in similar stages of life and therefore had similar needs, modern-day era veterans can make this transition at any stage, whether early on in their careers or later in life.

Through the Veterans Well-being Act, the government announced its pension for life plan, which reintroduced lifelong monthly payments with the pain and suffering compensation; established a new recognition benefit, the additional pain and suffering compensation; and introduced the income replacement benefit to simplify VAC's financial support programs by streamlining six different financial benefits into one, that being the new income replacement benefit.

We brought in better supports for the families of ill and injured veterans, including their caregivers, by eliminating time limits on vocational rehabilitation for veterans' survivors and spouses, expanding access to military family resource centres and introducing the caregiver recognition benefit.

• (1535)

[Translation]

To meet the growing demands and needs of our veterans, our government has invested \$11 billion in benefits and services.

We've also made changes to improve mental health care by introducing the automatic approval of mental health care claims. That way, veterans can get the help that they need when they need it.

[English]

Modern veterans, including those who served in the Persian Gulf, have sacrificed for our country. We owe them a debt of gratitude that can never fully be repaid.

[Translation]

I assure you that I take my responsibility as Minister of Veterans Affairs seriously. As a government, we're committed to ensuring that veterans receive the support needed during their transition and after their service.

This commitment also extends to the commemorative aspects of recognition, which can affect how veterans see themselves and feel appreciated by their fellow citizens.

[English]

It is my priority to ensure that veterans are recognized for their service, no matter where and when they served, whether it was in the Persian Gulf serving on humanitarian missions, supporting

Canadians impacted by the forest fires in Jasper, or through search and rescue operations.

[Translation]

As veterans' week draws near, I want veterans and their families to know that we're thinking of them and that we recognize their many sacrifices in the service of Canada. We would like to thank them.

[English]

Lastly, to those veterans who are here, who have also shared their stories during this study, I want to say a sincere thank you. To all those who are listening today, thank you for your service to Canada. We truly remain a grateful nation.

With that, Mr. Chair, we are prepared to take some questions from committee members.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. It was exactly five minutes.

Let's go to the first round of questions.

I invite the vice-chair of the committee, Mr. Blake Richards, for six minutes, please.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Minister, I first had the chance to ask you this particular question at this committee about a year ago. Today, in your opening remarks, you expressed your appreciation for service, including the service in the Persian Gulf. Just like then, today you were again not clear on the question that's really at the heart of this matter. Was the Persian Gulf war a war?

I'd like to ask you the same question I asked you a year ago. Do you believe the Persian Gulf war was, in fact, a war?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First of all, thank you so much, Mr. Richards, for that question. I'm always pleased to be appearing before the ACVA committee.

I do remember, very well, that last year you asked me that specific question. First and foremost, I want to thank all of the members, the more than 4,000 men and women who served in the Persian Gulf war, and I say "war".

We have to recognize that the men and women who served in the Persian Gulf were in harm's way, number one. They were also outside of the safety of Canada, and they signed up for this mission.

Do I consider this a war? I would consider it a war. With respect to the legislation, however, my definition as to what I qualify as a war does not necessarily mean that the legal definition in the legislation does the same.

• (1540)

Mr. Blake Richards: Fine.

Having said that, does that then mean there needs to be a change in the legislation? Would you support a change in the legislation to designate these heroes as having served during wartime service?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, we have to take a few steps back in looking at the Government of Canada.... All the different governments of the day have certainly looked at reviewing these different types of benefits.

First and foremost, if we take a long step back, back in the early 1900s, when we first put the pensions of the day in place, they were there to meet the needs of the First World War and the Second World War. As I said in my opening remarks, the realities back then, and the needs of veterans back then, are very different from their needs today.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt you, because, obviously, the time is limited.

We're well aware of the circumstances around different.... You mentioned them in your opening remarks. We've heard them at this committee. The question really comes down to this: "Would you support a change that would enable these veterans to get the recognition they deserve, which is that they served during wartime service?" That's really a yes or no question.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, I welcome the study that committee members are doing—

Mr. Blake Richards: Do you support—

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: —and I welcome the recommendations that will be brought forward.

Again, I think it's truly important to make sure that we listen to our stakeholders and that we listen to those men and women who served in the Persian Gulf. I truly look forward to receiving the recommendations from this committee.

Mr. Blake Richards: I'll just note that we didn't get a clear response to that question.

Let me ask you this. The last time you were here, you made the contention that it wasn't within your role to be able to make this change. It was within the Minister of National Defence's role. Is that still your contention?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The decision for this type of change to be made is in the purview of the Minister of National Defence, in consultation with the Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I appreciate that. We received a clear response there, at least.

Let me move to another topic that's very pertinent, with Remembrance Day coming up. In France, for the official commemorations by the Government of Canada on the 80th anniversary of D-Day, there were no prayers said by the military chaplains present. Now, at other ceremonies that were held by our allies or by other organizations, there were in fact prayers said.

Can you tell me why that was the case? Why were there no prayers said by the military chaplains at these ceremonies put on by the Government of Canada?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I would say, Mr. Richards, that I attended many of those ceremonies with you while we were in France. Prayers are moments of reflection. I really don't necessarily remember the exact words said by the chaplains, but in no way were any chaplains within the Canadian Armed Forces told that they were not allowed or permitted to say words of prayer. If they chose to make statements of reflection or prayers, either-or was absolutely appropriate and available.

Mr. Blake Richards: Minister, it's your contention, then, that there was no directive from your department that they could not. I know there is a directive in existence, of course, put out by the chaplain general of the Canadian Armed Forces, that indicates that prayers are not to be read by chaplains at those types of ceremonies.

Is it your contention that Veterans Affairs is not bound by that directive and did not make any direction to the chaplains that they couldn't pray, and that the chaplains themselves chose not to? Is that your contention?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Richards, like you and many members of this committee, we attend many Remembrance Day events across the country. Prayers are oftentimes part of those services.

With respect to the prayers and the moments of reflection that happened—

Mr. Blake Richards: I'm sorry. I apologize for the interruption, but we're talking about these services specifically. They were put on by your department, I believe, were they not?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Yes. I can tell you clearly, Mr. Richards, that we did not give any direction to the chaplain general indicating that they were not allowed to give prayers. That is absolutely clear. It did not come from our department.

Mr. Blake Richards: The chaplains who were there made the choice on their own, then, to not pray at those ceremonies. Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Moments of reflection, Mr. Richards, are prayers as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: Well, we'll have to agree to disagree on that one.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Richards.

Now let's go to MP Wilson Miao for six minutes, please.

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing at our committee again and again. It's always great to see you here with your officials.

As you know, we are undertaking this important study about the definitions of wartime service and special duty service. We have some gulf veterans sitting in the room here. You remarked that you recognize the Gulf War as a war. How can we make sure that, from a compensation perspective, it matches what was done in the past under the Pension Act as compared with the new Veterans Well-being Act?

• (1545)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much for that question. Again, thank you for the work this committee is doing on this very important study.

I'm going to finish the answer that I started with Mr. Richards with respect to the fact that times have changed when it comes to providing benefits and supports to our veterans. As I indicated, the needs of veterans from the First World War and the Second World War are very different from those of our modern-day veterans today. One of the reasons that review of the pensions was done back in 2006 and again in 2017 was specifically to ensure that we could meet the needs of the veterans who have served our country in different missions.

If we look back to 2006, what was brought forward was agreed upon by all parliamentarians in the House of Commons. In 2017—the minister at the time was Seamus O'Regan—we reviewed the benefits that were available to veterans. At the time, we wanted to ensure not only that financial benefits were going to be provided to our veterans, but also that we had a holistic approach to making sure we could provide our veterans with the services they needed. As a result, the new pension under the Veterans Well-being Act came in.

I want to recognize that we really wanted to focus on the seven.... When we talk about well-being for veterans, we want to make sure that we are really considering all levels of well-being, and that's not just financial well-being.

When I spoke to case managers in the past, they indicated to me that in previous years, before the new version of the pension was brought forward, they could not offer any services to our veterans at all. If people wanted to go back to work, let's say, and they needed to address some barriers or they needed vocational services or vocational counselling, none of that was available. With this new version, we are able to not only provide them with financial compensation in pensions, but also make sure that the seven domains of wellness are being addressed as well. It provides a package to make sure that we are addressing the needs of the veterans of today, and if they want to re-enter the workforce, they will have access to some of those benefits as well.

Today's reality for veterans is very different from that of many years ago. The average age of exiting members of the Canadian Armed Forces right now is approximately 37 years old, so many of them have many more years of their career ahead of them. We want to make sure that we not only equip them for the challenges of today but also equip them for opportunities in the future.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister, for your response.

We also heard from witnesses at this committee recently who said Veterans Affairs Canada is not active in research and does not

have a department devoted to doing research. Based on what I've been hearing, that's not my understanding.

Could you provide more insight from your perspective on this as a minister?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I can confirm that the Department of Veterans Affairs Canada has a research directorate. We've been involved in doing research over the past number of decades when it comes to issues pertaining to the well-being of veterans.

Since we formed government, we have put in place two centres of excellence, and we do research in collaboration with them. Many of you are very familiar with the Atlas Institute. It is a centre of excellence that does applied research in the areas of PTSD, PTSD and mental health. The other centre of excellence we've put in place is the Chronic Pain Centre of Excellence. Again, this centre of excellence continues to do really important work in that area. We continue to look at and review other research that is being done internationally as well.

Finally, Canada is also a member of the Five Eyes research group. Actually, Canada is a chair of that group as well.

We certainly recognize that there's always much more work that needs to be done in the area of research, but, as a government and as a department, we are committed to ensuring that that work is done.

Recently, you tabled a report on women veterans. We recognize that longitudinal studies when it comes to women veterans and women's health are very important.

These are the issues that we continue to take very seriously, and I'm pleased to see that the government and our department continue to do the work in that area.

• (1550)

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you, Minister.

We also heard from Rear Admiral Summers and Vice Admiral Miller at a recent meeting. They shared some powerful testimony on how they received bags of letters from students all across Canada who wanted them to know that their service was important and that Canadians were in their corner, even if they were halfway across the world. Vice Admiral Miller recalled that they responded to every letter.

With all that in mind, how can we help young people develop a better appreciation of the service and sacrifices made by armed forces veterans and, in particular, Persian Gulf veterans?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Saying thank you to these brave Canadian men and women is truly important. Through the Department of Veterans Affairs and through the tools we have, we want to make sure that we can make it easier for teachers and professionals.

Through the Veterans Affairs website, there are many tools that are available to ensure that commemoration is encouraged for young people.

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

As you know, you should address all of your questions through the chair, but I'm flexible on that.

Don't forget that we have interpretation, so try to respect the time.

[*Translation*]

I now have the pleasure of inviting the committee's second vice-chair to speak for the next six minutes.

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues.

Thank you for being here, Mr. Freeman, Mr. Ledwell and Minister Petitpas Taylor. It's always good to see you.

Minister, you said earlier that the veterans deployed in the Gulf were in a war zone. The word "war" is still an issue in this matter. I would like to clarify this point.

Is that what you said?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I said that they were in a danger zone.

[*English*]

They were in harm's way.

[*Translation*]

I did say that they were in a danger zone.

Mr. Luc Desilets: They were in a danger zone, not a war zone.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The troops sent to this region often refer to it as a war. According to my personal definition, it was indeed a war. The men and women deployed in this region are saying as much. I also said that, even though Ginette Petitpas Taylor considers it a war, the definition in the legislation may not be the same.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you have an issue with having a definition of the word "war" and having the impression that they were at war, but not being able to reflect this in our legislation?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I think that we must recognize that the legislative reviews carried out over the past few decades ultimately sought to meet the needs of the men and women who served in this war. I'm talking about Afghanistan and this mission, but I'm also thinking of other missions.

I want to make sure that the men and women veterans who suffered injuries and who have scars can access the services that they need when they need them. These services include compensation, rehabilitation, employment and other services.

We want to provide a range of services to help veterans overcome their challenges and move on to the next stage of their lives.

Mr. Luc Desilets: I understand that these Canadian military members were at war, but that Canada was not.

Is that right?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's right.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Is this logical and consistent?

Do you agree with this statement?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The war wasn't happening here in Canada. However, we deployed the Canadian Forces to this region to take part in the fight.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Nevertheless, we took part in three other recognized wars and the war wasn't happening here either.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, I look forward to receiving the committee's recommendations. As Minister of Veterans Affairs, my priority is to ensure that we meet the needs of the men and women who served in the Canadian Armed Forces and that we're there when they need us.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Minister, there were high risks involved. As you said, this conflict involved the highest level of risk that people can face. This was no small conflict. The risks were high, and these military members made sacrifices. This wasn't recognized properly after April 1, 2006.

Do you agree with this?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm not sure that I understood your question, Mr. Desilets.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Some military members left part of their health. It was a war. We agree on the word "war", except that it isn't recognized properly.

Do you agree with this?

We're talking about the compensation provided after the war.

• (1555)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The men and women who took part in this war, in this mission, deserve all the respect in the world from this committee and from me personally.

Again, we want to make sure that these men and women can access the services that they need.

Mr. Luc Desilets: How can you explain the absence of the word "war" on the war memorial here in Ottawa when it refers to the South African War of 1899-1902, for example?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: This monument, where hundreds if not thousands of Canadians gather on November 11, bears many inscriptions. During your consultations and committee meetings, you heard about a lack of consensus regarding the inscriptions on the monument.

I look forward to receiving the committee's recommendations. I think that we must hear Canadians' comments on what they want to see inscribed on this monument, which is very personal and intimate for Canadians.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You said that Veterans Affairs Canada was somehow bound by the legislation and that this responsibility fell to the Minister of National Defence, if I understood you correctly.

Is that what you said?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I said that this fell under the minister's responsibility, but also—and I just want to clarify this point—that I, as minister, should be consulted.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Good.

Would you be willing to table a bill to give Veterans Affairs Canada back its authority in these matters?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, Mr. Desilets, we need to hear all the testimony and receive your committee's recommendations. In the meantime, I look forward to reviewing the report and providing the government's response to this study.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Good.

Thank you, Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

[*English*]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney for six minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair, and as always, everything I say goes through the chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank the minister and her folks for being here with us today to talk about this really important issue.

The first question I have is around harmonizing benefits. We have heard from multiple Gulf War veterans that their concerns are legitimately about getting what they deserve and need. They really want that acknowledgement.

For example, Senator Patterson came in to visit us and talked about harmonizing benefits. We know that in 2019, the ombud made a recommendation that talked about harmonizing benefits. Something that veterans have brought up to me repeatedly is this fear and concern about one set of veterans getting one type of benefit and others getting a different one.

I recognize that it was a vote that was done in the House that everybody supported, but I believe that we've heard enough that harmonizing benefits should be part of the discussion.

I'm wondering if there is any work happening in the department around that.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First and foremost, thank you for the question, Ms. Blaney.

I also wanted to take a moment to congratulate you on your new appointment as PSPC critic. I was happy to see that you're not leaving VAC, because we've done some good work. You've done some really good work, and the women would be very disappointed if you were brought on to another committee. Thank you and congratulations on that. I look forward to being at your event this evening as well. That's just to say that.

The harmonization of both acts.... I know that this committee has heard this from some witnesses who have come forward, one of them being Senator Patterson. I think both acts are vital in our ef-

orts to support veterans. Both acts are significant. Again, I don't want to review the history behind it all, but I can tell you that when I speak to Veterans Affairs case managers or agents who work with veterans, they tell me that the newest revision of this act has actually provided veterans with many more tools to be able to move on to the next phase of their life.

When we talk about the seven domains of wellness for our veterans, those were areas that were not even addressed with the past pensions that we had. It was because we wanted to make sure that veterans are able to gain effective control of their lives and to move on that the revision, if you will, of the Veterans Well-being Act was done. It was because we wanted to make sure that veterans qualify for the financial and compensation benefits.

It's also because so many veterans are exiting the Canadian Armed Forces at a much younger age. We want to make sure we're setting them up for success and addressing the barriers they may face. These are things like providing them with mental health counselling and supports and making sure they have access to vocational training. I know you are all familiar with the programs that Veterans Affairs offers. That is really vital, and we want to make sure they have access to that.

● (1600)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: One thing I found really startling was a lot of the testimony that we heard about a lack of awareness or acceptance within Veterans Affairs around the Gulf War syndrome. In fact, just a few days ago, we had Mr. Bruyca and Ms. Richard here with many stacks of applications and appeals. The paperwork was quite daunting.

My concern is that veterans who served us during that time are having to prove Gulf War syndrome repeatedly and are having to go through an appeal process that delays and delays. Of course, like any community that served together, they talk to one another. We see this again and again with veterans. It defeats not only the people facing the challenge but also the people who served before they even put their foot in the front door.

I'm just wondering if there is any work that's being done to address this issue, so that when people come forward with these types of serious health issues that are very well documented and researched in other countries, but maybe not so much in Canada...to stop that.

It goes back to what I've spoken about before, which is that we really need trauma-informed services. People who have gone through serious trauma while they're serving this country need people on the other end of the phone who understand that trauma can impact people in a very particular way.

Having to prove your illness again and again and having to feel that you're fighting for your basic rights is not what we want to see. I'm just wondering if any work is happening around acknowledging these illnesses, to make the duty less burdensome on the veterans who serve us.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have three points that I'll make very quickly. I know that we're short on time here.

The Chair: You have one minute and a half.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: First and foremost is trauma-informed training for our staff. That was a recommendation that was made in the last study that you did. I am absolutely committed to making sure that our staff at Veterans Affairs Canada receive trauma-informed training, specifically when working with our veteran population.

Number two, when it comes to the issue of Gulf War syndrome, any veteran who has been injured as a result of a service-related matter, if any of them are listening to us today, should contact Veterans Affairs Canada. If there is a need, we want to be there to help them.

I was told just recently, through the department, that when a veteran comes forward with a Gulf War syndrome issue, if you will, if their claim has been denied, that claim is going to be sent to a health professional within Veterans Affairs Canada. We want that file to be reviewed. Perhaps one of my colleagues can elaborate a bit on that afterwards. We want to make sure that the file is reviewed in its totality to make sure that we haven't missed anything.

Finally, you talked about delay. That, however, will create a delay in the processing of the file, because we are putting another step in that. That process is done automatically when it comes to individuals who come forward with those types of issues or illnesses.

I don't know if Paul or Mitch wants to elaborate.

The Chair: I'm sorry. We will come back, because the time is already up. We will come back in the next round.

We have this round of 25 minutes. We may be able to ask you more questions.

I invite Mr. Fraser Tolmie for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you, Minister, for joining us today.

Minister, in your opening statement, I may have heard you wrong, but you referred to the Gulf War as a humanitarian effort. I know that a portion of that was a humanitarian effort. We've heard how our forces were in harm's way.

There was one question from my colleague, Mr. Richards. You said that you personally felt that Canadians who served in the Gulf War... It was a war in your own personal definition. I appreciate that. Thank you for sharing that, but you said that legislation has a different definition from what you consider to be a war. Could you tell me what legislation you're referring to?

• (1605)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I did not bring the copy of the legislation to have in front of me, but I am more than happy to table it for you at my earliest convenience.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I appreciate that; thank you so much.

I think that this legislation is important. You also mentioned that it was under the Minister of National Defence's purview, and yours, as the associate. I feel like we're halfway there.

What is stopping you from calling the Minister of National Defence and saying, "Let's settle this. Let's call this a war, and let's get this done and dealt with"?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That is why this committee is undertaking this very important study at the moment. I have met with several veterans from the Gulf War over the past 14 months, and they wanted this study to be undertaken.

I again want to thank all of the committee members for doing this important study and for listening to the veterans and the stakeholders on the matter. I truly look forward to receiving the recommendations from the committee.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Mr. Chair, I feel that you already agree. I think we do important work in this committee. We already have the same answer, so I think we're already there.

If we say that we call it a war, are you going to say to the minister, "Yes, let's call it a war"?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I'm truly looking forward to the work and the recommendations of this committee. I'm going to do my due diligence and review all of the recommendations. I'm looking forward to responding to the committee reports with a government response.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Thank you.

We didn't get a yes or no on that, which is disappointing, because I really appreciated your personal opinion that it's a war. I feel that you have influence in this department. I think you have influence on making this change. I really hope that, through the efforts this committee is putting forward, we will see results and a recommendation that is acted upon.

I'm going to ask you another question. What legislation had to be changed in order to allow for the Korean vets to be recognized for their wartime service? Is it the same legislation that you're going to be forwarding to us?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm going to let one of my officials answer that question.

Before I turn it over to them, let's be frank. Whatever legislation that transpires will be done by Parliament. We all have a voice in Parliament. We're over 300 voices in Parliament—there are 338 of us there—and we will be able to debate that in the House. If that is the case and such are the wishes of the committee, there will be steps moving forward.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Through you, Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Nothing comes forward unless you bring it forward. We feel like we're spinning in circles here. The answer is right here. The opportunity is right here. You agree with us. It just seems to be that....

All it takes is action. All it takes is one phone call to the Minister of National Defence to say, "Let's call this a war. Let's get this sorted out," and we can start acting on other things that this committee could be tackling.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I don't think that anyone is going in circles. I think this study has been very important, very informative, in enabling us to understand the intricacies of benefits, of supports that are offered to veterans. I dare say that many members of this committee have learned an awful lot about this important issue.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Yes, but, again, you agree with us. You agree with what the committee is hearing. This is within your purview.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Now I'd like to invite Ms. Lisa Hepfner for five minutes, please.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the minister and officials for being here to answer our questions today.

MP Blaney brought up the testimony from the honourable Senator Rebecca Patterson, who was here recently talking about her experiences. She was also talking about her experiences helping to set up the women veterans council, something that I'm very excited about as PS to the Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth.

I'm hoping you can give us an update on what's happening with that committee, but also tell us about how that committee can better help us communicate and commemorate the service of modern-day veterans, in particular those who served in the Persian Gulf, because that's what we're studying today.

Perhaps the members of the Conservative Party could keep their voices down a bit, because it's getting distracting.

Thank you.

• (1610)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much, Ms. Hepfner, for that question.

Like you and many members of the committee, I'm extremely excited and looking forward to the formation of this committee. Senator Patterson and a few others have worked hard and continue to work hard, and I look forward to being able to make the official announcement of the committee members in the very near future.

First of all, to take a step back, with respect to the application process for the committee, we were quite pleasantly surprised with the number of applicants who put their names forward to be members of the council. Again, we are really pleased with the number of people who have applied and are looking forward to working with this incredible group of individuals. They will be able to provide me with advice and assistance when it comes to working with

women veterans, modern-day veterans and so on. Again, I'm looking forward to making the actual announcement very soon.

I think I'll leave it at that.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I was incredibly honoured to join you and the Canadian delegation when we went to France for the 80th anniversary of D-Day. It was an incredible experience.

In particular, we had a Hamilton veteran with us, Major-General Richard Rohmer. It was incredible to have him there and to listen to his reflections while he was back in France.

You've been in this role for a year or so. You must have spoken to hundreds, if not thousands, of veterans. What are the overlying themes? What are you hearing most from veterans when they speak to you one-on-one?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you so much for that question.

Many of us attended the 80th anniversary of D-Day. You and also Mr. Richards were present. Meeting with individuals like General Rohmer, some of the greatest, the best of the best Canadians, was an absolute honour and a privilege for all of us who attended those services. Also, we had many Canadians who were there as well and who attended those events.

With respect to your specific question, yes, over the past 14 months I've had the opportunity of meeting with thousands of veterans from coast to coast to coast. Being an eager minister, I wanted to make sure that I was able to establish those relationships with veterans, to learn from veterans and also to learn from stakeholders who work with veterans day in and day out.

Just this past Friday, I was in Prince Edward Island, at the Kingston Legion Branch 30, I believe. When I dropped in, there was a coffee meet and greet. On the last Friday of every month, they have this event. I was not the guest speaker. I was just there to really have a visit and a call out with our veterans, and just to hear from them. The themes that were brought up at that meeting were very similar to the engagement that I have and to the feedback that I receive from veterans. They mentioned the issue of service delivery for some individuals. They wanted to speak to me about that. I also heard about My VAC Account and heard that some of the veterans were having difficulties navigating that system.

When I got back to the office in Charlottetown that afternoon, of course, after I heard those issues directly from veterans, I spoke to my staff to find out what exactly was happening and what we were doing in order to effect change. They indicated to me that every time we do an overview or an update of My VAC Account, the department has a focus group of 10 or so veterans who actually try out the new system to make sure that it's user friendly. I asked them if we were taking perhaps younger veterans who are very savvy when it comes to the Internet or to programs, or if we were using folks who perhaps are less savvy. The test cases they do are with regard to people who perhaps may not find it as easy with respect to using computers.

We always want to improve the services that we provide to our veterans. Those are just some examples of the issues that have been brought forward. Again, I really appreciated meeting with the Kingston Legion Branch 30 members and receiving my first official poppy from them that day.

Thank you.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, will Gulf War veterans be officially introduced at Remembrance Day ceremonies in Ottawa?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I assume that you're referring to the ceremony on November 11 in Ottawa.

Veterans Affairs Canada doesn't organize the ceremony. The Royal Canadian Legion is responsible for organizing the day.

The legion invites me, as Minister of Veterans Affairs, to lay a wreath. Members of Parliament are also invited to lay a wreath.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You have no authority over this?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I take part in this moving ceremony as a guest. I was fortunate enough to take part in it for the first time last year, as a guest only.

Mr. Luc Desilets: There will likely be hundreds of Gulf War veterans at the ceremony. It hurts them not to be identified and recognized. They did serve their country.

Do you agree with me on this?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Mr. Desilets, the ceremony in Ottawa on November 11 will be attended by thousands of veterans who took part in various conflicts around the world.

Again, I would like to express my gratitude to the men and women who served in all the missions abroad.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Minister, I'll talk about another matter that I've advocated for vigorously and relentlessly. This matter concerns the monument to the war mission in Afghanistan.

You have often said that the voice of veterans matters to you. You said that you listened to them and responded to their requests following a survey. At the time, your focus was on veterans. All the witnesses who appeared before the committee and all the comments made in the extensive correspondence received by the committee all point in one direction. The needs are totally identical, as you can imagine.

Do you also intend to listen to Gulf War veterans and support their requests?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: The chair has just motioned to me. I'll give you a brief answer.

My mother always told me, Mr. Desilets, that I had two mouths and one ear. Active listening is truly one of my skills. I'll continue to listen to what veterans have to say.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets and Minister.

[*English*]

Now let's go to Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Through you to the minister, I understand VAC just announced that its Women Veterans Forum will be on March 6 and 7 of next year, which is very exciting. I understand it's been in P.E.I., Montreal and Ottawa, and that the location has not been announced.

May I recommend somewhere in the west? That's just a recommendation, and I'll leave it with you.

Madam Minister, I tabled motion 132. That is a motion based on having legislation on a duty to inform serving Canadian Armed Forces personnel, released members and their families, so they understand the various benefits and services to which they may be entitled, no matter how extreme their disabilities and loss. I've heard so many veterans, particularly from the Gulf War, talk about the fact that they will be turning 65 very soon. They don't know what retirement is going to look like for them under the programs they're in. They're very concerned, because of the impacts of Gulf War syndrome, about their capacity to deal with these issues, or with a worker from VAC. It's going to be incredibly difficult, painful and traumatizing again. I really believe in the motion I put forward. We need to have a more assertive process for letting veterans and service members know what benefits and resources they have.

I'm wondering if there is any work being done at the department around making sure there's a better, more trauma-informed system, because we've heard from so many veterans that it's not happening well right now.

• (1620)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you again, Ms. Blaney, for that question.

I would say that, as a department, we are always looking at ways to better inform veterans about the services and benefits they are entitled to.

For example, as members of the Canadian Armed Forces exit and face retirement, many will go through transition interviews at transition centres and so on. It's very important to make sure Veterans Affairs staff are included in those transition centres so the sharing of information can take place.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry. I don't want to interrupt. I just want to clarify.

The veterans I was talking about are veterans who are working age and on many benefits because of their service. They're about to retire. It's from veteran to a retirement-age veteran. I just want to make sure we're clear.

Thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you for that.

We also, through the department, want to make sure we maximize the tools we have so that veterans, as indicated, are aware of the benefits they may be entitled to. Through our case managers, and also through our social media campaigns, you'll notice that, during the month of November.... It's not just in November, actually. All through the year, we have different social media campaigns to make sure veterans recognize they may qualify for services and benefits through Veterans Affairs Canada.

Those are the types of tools we put in place to make sure more veterans are aware of what they're entitled to.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now, let's go to Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

Can you remind me about the age stipulation for modern-day veterans when they end their service?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I'm sorry. Could you speak a bit louder?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Sure.

You were talking about modern-day veterans and the difference.... You were talking about the age they were at when they returned home and therefore had a lot of time left to do other things.

What was the age you mentioned?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: With respect to the modern-day veterans we're seeing right now—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: What is the age?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Among individuals retiring from the Canadian Armed Forces at this present time, the average age is 37 years old.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

What was the average age of wartime veterans when they returned home?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, I don't have that number in front of me, but I can ask my staff if they are aware.

Mitch or Paul.

Mr. Paul Ledwell (Deputy Minister, Department of Veterans Affairs): I don't believe we have that number.

Most of the wartime veterans, certainly in the First World War and the Second World War, would have been conscripts. They would have volunteered to serve. They would all have left at the same time, roughly, as well, so they were all releasing soon after each of those wars.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Would you say that they were probably a lot younger when they returned home?

Mr. Paul Ledwell: It could vary. There were some older service-women and servicemen as well.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

I was just questioning why we had to come up with a different term. The argument was that they were younger. One of the arguments was that hundreds of thousands of volunteers and conscripts who took part in the First World War, Second World War, and Korean War were proportionally.... The changing of it to "modern-day veterans" is because we are dealing with proportionally much smaller numbers of military personnel now who made their careers in the CAF in the decades that followed.

I don't understand why, if there was a smaller number of military personnel proportionally compared to those who served in those initial wars, we felt we needed to make a change to their funding.

Am I hearing you right? Are you saying that you, as Minister of Veterans Affairs, could not determine this for Gulf War veterans? Couldn't we change it to wartime service? The veterans minister couldn't make that designation, could she?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: No, she cannot, not by herself.

If I may, Mrs. Wagantall—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: No. I want to make the comparison, because the truth of the matter is that the Department of National Defence, from hearing the witness who came to this committee, also cannot designate an operation as a wartime service.

I think we're pulling people's leg here, because neither of you can do it. National Defence can't do it, and neither can Veterans Affairs. What is the reason for that? Do you know?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Once again, Mrs. Wagantall, when you mentioned the needs of veterans being different for First World War and Second World War veterans, today—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Why can you not make that change? It's legislated.

● (1625)

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: That's exactly what I said earlier.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's exactly the truth of the matter. It doesn't matter what this committee comes up with.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If the committee comes up with a recommendation with respect to legislative changes, those are the types of things that we're going to have.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You already know those things. That's what I'm saying. This isn't new.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Please speak in turn.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm choosing to respond.

In the midst of the circumstances, the point is that, as minister, you know, and the Minister of National Defence knows, this requires a legislative change. Am I correct?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I have made that very clear today, Mrs. Wagantall.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

I don't believe that it's coming through as clearly as it should, because the reality is that we have people here who were impacted by a significant change. I'm not arguing that there isn't a more varied suite of services, because I believe there is. I keep hearing they may be entitled to the services, maybe, maybe, maybe.

What has frustrated many of our veterans is that they're told over and over again that these circumstances are better, yet the fight to get them is extensive, and the backlogs are extensive. There isn't a sense they are better off. Perhaps they should be.

You talk about how there's a far smaller portion of military personnel compared to back then, yet those who served back then have not had the issues that our modern-day veterans have with the system that is in front of them. There is a great deal of angst there that has been brought on by a change over which they didn't have any influence. They are simply faced with it.

Can you tell me, for the Korean veterans, what their designation was when they went?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mrs. Wagantall. The time has expired.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I would like an answer to that question.

The Chair: It's up to the minister. She can send a response to the committee through the clerk.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That would be good.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: I can send it.

The Chair: We will distribute it to all members.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: My question is, what was their designation when they went to war?

The Chair: Mrs. Wagantall, thank you very much.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I'm just asking to clarify.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up. As I said at the last meeting, bring your chronometer with you. Each member has questions, and we have to respect the time allowed.

Next, we have Mr. Sean Casey, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Madam Minister, Mr. Freeman and Mr. Ledwell.

Madam Minister, I'm quite impressed that you were able to get to the Kingston Legion. If you got in your car and went to Kingston, you'd find yourself about seven kilometres away from the Kingston Legion, which is actually located in the municipality of New Haven, so good on you.

Madam Minister, Mr. Richards asked you about prayer at the D-Day ceremonies, but he didn't ask you about flags. He asked some other witnesses about flags, so I'd like you to talk about flags.

By way of background, on October 7, a Veterans Affairs employee was here. Mr. Richards said, "We've seen a lack of Canadian flags in the colour party at official Canadian events for the 80th anniversary of D-Day." Unfortunately, she was not afforded an opportunity to answer that question.

At the next meeting, a question was posed to some veterans who were here testifying on this particular study. Those veterans were asked:

How [would it] make you feel as a veteran who fought for this country, who was prepared to give your life for this country, to know that during the recent D-Day commemorations in France, there were no Canadian flags as part of the ceremony?

Minister, I understand you were there. Could you tell us whether there were any Canadian flags as part of the ceremony?

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Absolutely there were Canadian flags at the ceremony, Mr. Casey. Mr. Richards, who was present with me, and also Ms. Blaney, who was present with me during the week-long events, saw many, many Canadian flags that were displayed.

I have to say that I find it quite disappointing, incredibly disappointing, that someone would lead this committee in error and also state that to veterans. That is just not okay. It's one thing—

Mr. Blake Richards: On a point of order, it was quite clear that the colour party at those ceremonies—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: That's not a point of order. That's debate.

A voice: That is not a point of order. That is a point of interruption.

The Chair: No. I am sorry, Mr. Richards. We will continue with the discussion. We have all of that.

Minister, I'm so sorry. The floor is yours.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Again, during the Canadian events we had that day at Juno Beach, the department and the Canadian Armed Forces ensured that there were 13 Canadian flags that were flying and went up the flagpole that day. Members of the Canadian Armed Forces actually took those flags and made sure they wrapped them appropriately. Members of Veterans Affairs Canada ensured that they were placed in beautiful shadow boxes, Mr. Casey, to be presented to each of our elderly veterans at our last ceremony that evening, at the last evening of our events.

I remember very clearly, actually, that Mr. Richards came up to me and said, “What a beautiful touch that was,” that we were able to present each and every veteran with a flag that flew on Juno Beach the day of the Canadian service.

I can tell you, with regard to every event we attended, that if the committee allows me, I'd be more than happy to table many pictures of the events that occurred that week, to ensure that people can see that we were quite proud in ensuring that our Canadian flag was present. I'm sure that many members of the committee who were there would be able to testify to that as well.

• (1630)

Mr. Blake Richards: On a point of order, again, I would be happy to table the pictures that show there were no flags at the colour party that were Canadian flags.

The Chair: That's discussion, Mr. Richards. Thank you very much. You will have your turn to speak. It is not your turn now.

Go ahead, Mr. Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey: Mr. Chair, will the time from Mr. Richards' non-points of order be added back to my time, or does he get them?

The Chair: No, no, he doesn't have them. There's no problem at all.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Mr. Sean Casey: There was some other testimony from the last meeting on this study that I want to draw to your attention to. It came from a couple of veterans who appeared before the committee and indicated that Charlottetown was far away from vets and politics and “the wrong place to be”. It was “hidden...away on a little island so conveniently far away that it's too far for a veteran to know they're being served properly.”

It doesn't matter to me whether it's you, Madam Minister, or your deputy, but I would ask you to respond to those comments as to whether it is a disservice to veterans to have the national headquarters of the Department of Veterans Affairs located outside the national capital region. Thank you.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Casey.

I'll be very frank: I am very proud knowing that our Veterans Affairs headquarters is in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. On our watch, the offices certainly will not be moved out of Prince Edward Island. I want to thank all the Veterans Affairs staff who do incredible work day in and day out, on the island but also across the country. We have 69 Veterans Affairs offices across the country, from coast to coast to coast, that offer quality services to all veterans.

I truly do not feel that all national offices have to be centralized in Ottawa. I think it's very healthy to ensure that we're close to the people. Being in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, has worked very well for the department. Again, on this watch, the office certainly will not be taken out of Prince Edward Island.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now stop the first hour.

[*Translation*]

I see that you want to make a comment, Minister.

You have the floor for 10 seconds.

[*English*]

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor: If you will allow me, Mr. Chair, I've been advised that a committee staff member has been working with this committee for a number of years. Her name is Munro Watters. She's been supporting the committee, but she's moving on to brighter pastures—or to other pastures, I should say. They tell me she's out sick today, so she's meeting us online. I simply wanted to say thank you to her for all the work she's done.

Chapeau. I wish you all the best in your future projects.

Thank you, Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: The message has been passed on, Minister.

Thank you.

On behalf of the committee members and on my part, I want to thank the Minister of Veterans Affairs for joining us.

I also want to thank Paul Ledwell, deputy minister, and Mitch Freeman, director general, policy and research.

Colleagues, I'll now suspend the meeting before moving on to the second hour of the meeting.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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