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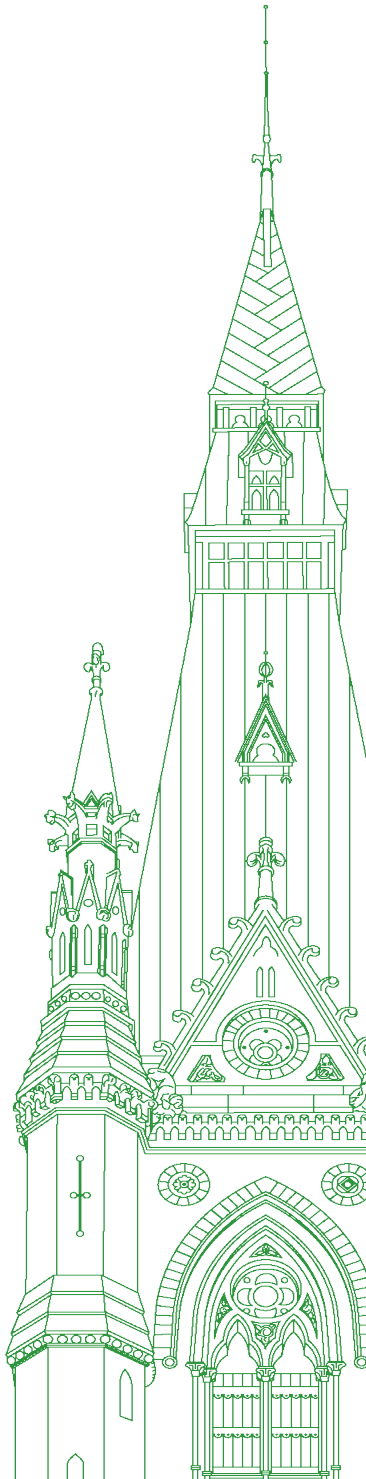

Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Thursday, December 12, 2024

● (1100)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 122 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 29, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the experience of indigenous veterans and Black veterans.

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid form.

I would like to welcome the committee members who are participating in the meeting today by videoconference. They include Mr. Richards and Tim Louis, who is replacing Mr. Miao.

[*English*]

We also have other colleagues online. We have Mel Arnold, who is replacing Mr. Tolmie.

[*Translation*]

Also with us is Martin Champoux, who is replacing Mr. Desilets.

I would remind all participants that all comments should be directed to the chair.

As usual, on behalf of the members of the committee, I would like to welcome all veterans who are watching or listening to this meeting.

[*English*]

For this hour, we welcome back the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families. We have with us MaryAnn Notarianni, deputy chief executive officer and executive vice-president of knowledge mobilization, and Meriem Benlamri, director of knowledge mobilization. She is appearing by video conference.

From Indspire, we have Yvan Guy Larocque, who is on the board of directors and is clinical counsel at the University of Manitoba's faculty of law, joining us by video conference. We have Mr. William Shead, who is also on the board of directors and is also joining by video conference.

From the Last Post Fund, we have Maria Antonia Trujillo, project coordinator of the indigenous veterans initiative, by video conference.

I think you know the rules because you have been here before.

I heard we're not doing any opening remarks. That's great. All of the witnesses have already made opening remarks, so we will start right away with questions and answers.

I'm going to start with Mrs. Cathay Wagantall for six minutes, please.

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

I am very pleased that we were able to have you folks come back so we could do this properly and ask you some questions.

MaryAnn, for those of us who may not know, can you give an explanation of knowledge mobilization or define what it means?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni (Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Vice-President, Knowledge Mobilization, Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families): I would be happy to. Thank you for the question.

Knowledge mobilization, at its core, is all about taking evidence and getting it in front of and into the hands of those who can use it. It's really about getting knowledge and information, and packaging it in such a way that it will reach the intended audience.

At its core, knowledge mobilization is also about mobilizing or moving that evidence into action so that it can have a positive impact. That's how we approach it at Atlas. The simplest definition is taking information and getting it into the hands of those who can use it.

I'd be happy to elaborate on our approach and the way we do that at Atlas since it can take different forms, if time permits.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: What are your funding sources?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We are funded through Veterans Affairs Canada. Our primary funding comes through a contribution agreement with Veterans Affairs Canada.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Are they the major source of what would be studied, as far as requesting studies and research to be done goes?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We exist as an arm's-length organization. We were set up intentionally as such through the contribution agreement. That means they give us our funding and outline the pillars or main functions of how we work, research being one of them.

At the same time, there is a distance in that they aren't directing exactly what we study, which allows us to look at the gaps in the research and, importantly, to consult with and engage veterans and their families on what matters to them. We can also scan the landscape, see what's being done and look for opportunities where there is a need for more research. That's part of how we determine what we'll research.

We're funded to do research, but VAC doesn't get to tell us what to research.

● (1105)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Can you give me one really significant example, from your perspective, of where you found a gap and made the decision to do research on it?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Yes, I'm happy to.

This complements what you as a committee have done around women veterans after seeing big gaps there. That's something we identified early on. We have taken an approach to be very participatory in how we set out a program of study on the mental health and well-being of women veterans. We've done that through our Athena project.

We presented to this committee in the spring for your previous study on that in the early days. We now have two studies under way.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's wonderful. Thank you.

You're doing the research. How do you determine which veterans to reach out to? How do you reach out to ensure you get a significant cohort to get the results you would need in order to say you have exact and accurate outcomes?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: That's a great question. There are a couple of ways I'd like to address that.

One, when we're designing research studies, we recruit based on the study we're doing. That's going to have certain inclusion criteria depending on the topic of study. We do clinical research. We also do applied research, which could be qualitative and more about interviews, for example.

For the people on whom we are conducting research or who would be implicated in that research—the "subjects" of the research, for lack of a better word—we would have the criteria we need. We use all sorts of strategies to get the word out to reach veterans and families that fit the profile so we can get the samples we need to have a study that gives us robust enough evidence to speak to.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I have a question on that.

As you're probably aware, there are all kinds of veterans groups online that are in the thousands. Do you ever reach out to them to say, "Here is what we're studying. If you think you can contribute, reach out to us." Then, of course, you do what you need to do to ensure they fit into that scenario. Have you done that?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Yes, of course. We use a variety of channels. We leverage social media to get the word out through organic posts or even paid social media, just to try to reach people on different platforms. We will work with groups that are willing to post for us. We will work with individual champions who have large networks. I met someone, a veteran, who was very proud of the network she had. She said she would share things.

Absolutely, we use all sorts of ways to reach as diverse a group and as wide a group as possible.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do you reach out to the veterans advisory groups the government has?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Some of our lived experience staff have memberships on a couple of those advisory groups. We're connected with people in various ways on those advisory groups.

VAC is certainly a champion in spreading the word for us through VAC's "Salute!" and through other community engagement outreach in particular.

In many ways, through our personal networks or our official networks, we get the word out.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Do I have time left?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I had hoped to get to the Last Post Fund. I'm quite concerned about the challenges they're facing, but unfortunately, I'll have to leave that for someone else to pursue.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to MP Randeep Sarai for six minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the guests for coming back.

I'll go to those online, because they always get neglected. The people in the room sometimes get more questions.

I'll put my first question to Indspire. Could you share more details about the indigenous post-secondary scholarship trust, including how it was established, its intent and the impact the program is having?

Mr. William Shead (Board of Directors, Indspire): I can probably answer that, because I was there when it was established.

In 1995, the Senate Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs had a study on aboriginal veterans, which was co-chaired by the late Senator Len Marchand. One of their recommendations to the government was establishing a scholarship and bursary fund to commemorate the service of aboriginal veterans. This they did. They called for proposals from various organizations—an expression of interest to see who would be prepared to administer the fund. The organization that succeeded was the Canadian Native Arts Foundation, which at the time was chaired by John Kim Bell. It was a small organization raising money to support aboriginal artists.

Subsequently, when we took over the fund, we realized it could not be used strictly for arts. It had to be for a broad variety of scholarships and disciplines. When we did that, we couldn't call ourselves the Canadian Native Arts Foundation; we had to call ourselves something else. We came up with the concept of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, because at the time, we were also sponsoring the achievement awards now known as the Indspire awards.

Some years ago, we changed our name again to “Indspire”—I-N-D for “indigenous” and S-P-I-R-E for “inspiration”. We found that the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation was quite long and had to be translated into French, which was very difficult. The word “Indspire” does not need to be translated. We came up with a logo and a whole range of things to change our image.

We also reached out to industry and other organizations, and we changed our strategies for fundraising to the point where we're now able to raise a significant amount of funds not just from individual donors but also from corporations, businesses and various departments of the government. We—

● (1110)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I'm sorry to cut you off there. Because of time, I want to ask my next question while I have you here.

Mr. William Shead: No, that's fine.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Can you tell us how indigenous veterans can contribute to educating younger generations, especially by advocating for their own communities and ensuring their contributions to Canadian military history are taught and acknowledged by everyone?

Mr. William Shead: Veterans are called upon regularly to speak at significant events, such as the anniversary of significant battles like the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the Dieppe raid. They are also called upon heavily for Remembrance Day.

When we go out, we speak about the need for individuals—students and young people—to stay with their program of education. A number of us are involved with another organization that sponsors a volunteer speakers bureau, The Memory Project, so it's not just about reaching out and encouraging people to stick with education. We do that. There are gatherings of students whenever we have achievement awards, or the Indspire awards. We get about 1,500 students each time we have these events. It's like a trade show, where they learn about educational opportunities in various universities and job opportunities in various industries, whether it's in mining, general business or banking.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

I am going to ask a question quickly of the Last Post Fund.

It's been five years since the Last Post Fund introduced the indigenous veterans initiative. Could you share some key facts and figures on the impact of that program in its first five years? How do you hope the program will evolve over the next five years?

Go quickly, by the way, because I only have 60 seconds.

Ms. Maria Trujillo (Project Coordinator, Indigenous Veterans Initiative, Last Post Fund): We've worked so far with 45 indigenous communities throughout Canada. We work with researchers too. Out of those 45 communities, we've worked with 25 local researchers from the community. That has led to over 270 grave markers being placed on previously unmarked graves of indigenous veterans.

Another component of the program is that we add the traditional names of veterans on new tombstones, but we'll go back retroactively, too, and add any traditional names we missed. That has also been quite popular.

While we hope that for the next five years we get more interest in the program, the difficult thing is outreach. We're hoping that for at least the next five years, the goal will be 500 more tombstones for previously unmarked graves.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Champoux, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being with us today. I was not there when they testified before the committee the first time, so I was not fortunate to hear their opening remarks, which might have given me a bit more context. I would ask them to forgive me if I ask them questions that seem a little repetitive.

My questions will be for Ms. Notarianni or Ms. Benlamri, from the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families.

Just now, you told my colleague Ms. Wagantall that your organization was funded primarily by Veterans Affairs Canada. What are your organization's other funding sources?

[*English*]

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Veterans Affairs Canada is our primary funder. We have had modest amounts of funding through a couple of partner agreements for specific initiatives we've undertaken.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Is that funding public or private?

[*English*]

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: It's public.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Can you tell us what public organizations these were?

[*English*]

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We've done a partnership with the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment, which had funds through the Public Health Agency of Canada. I think it was related to some of the COVID-19 funding that went out. That's one example and is, I believe, another similar centre in the public sphere.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: You also said that your funding sources, such as Veterans Affairs Canada, did not require that your research examine certain topics and that you yourselves determined what topics you considered to be useful.

Have you done any research that is directly connected with the current study concerning indigenous and Black veterans?

If so, can you tell us about that? What were the findings?

Again, forgive me if you have already answered these questions when you testified earlier.

[*English*]

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: No apology is necessary.

We don't have a specific study of research on indigenous veterans or Black veterans. We are doing some knowledge mobilization work about first nations, Inuit and Métis veterans. Meriem is on the call, and she can speak more to that if there's some time.

Ms. Meriem Benlamri (Director, Knowledge Mobilization, Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families): Thank you.

Brought to our attention early on was the need for targeted, culturally relevant, psycho-educational information that's specific to the unique experiences of first nations, Inuit and Métis veterans and their families. In response, the Atlas Institute initiated a project through which we're hoping to codevelop knowledge products in collaboration with a first nation, Inuit and Métis advisory group.

At the moment, we are coleading this work with two senior strategists: Tim O'Loan, a veteran from the Sahtu Dene first nation, and Shauna Mulligan, a Métis Ph.D. student in indigenous studies and a retired CAF reserve corporal. We've been working quite closely with these folks to learn what our role might be in supporting the development of informational resources and in learning how we can facilitate the co-creation. We started this work in 2023, and we're hoping that it will keep going past 2027, so we want to take the time to make sure we do this work in a culturally relevant and informed manner.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: If I understand correctly, you are not close to finishing. You say that the study will keep going to 2027. So it is going to be pretty thorough.

That said, have you determined specific needs at this point? Have you focused on specific aspects that will probably be part of your report or your recommendations? What information has come out of this study to date?

● (1120)

[*English*]

Ms. Meriem Benlamri: Just to clarify, it's not a research study. It's a knowledge mobilization project. The hope is that by the end of the project we will have co-created informational resources that do a few things: honour the sacrifices of first nation, Inuit and Métis veterans; identify some of their mental health knowledge needs; and address them through information.

That being said, we did host a round table in October with a focus on access to mental health care in rural and remote locations. We hosted an in-person event where we asked veterans and family members, alongside policy-makers, researchers, service providers and some other system-level players, to share their experiences on the barriers, the success factors and the potential areas for change in relation to their experiences and understanding of accessing mental health care in rural and remote areas.

We heard three themes, which we spoke to in our earlier testimony, but I can go over them again. The first theme that came through, as we heard from folks, was about the importance of culturally relevant care and models of healing. We heard that many first nation, Inuit and Métis veterans find that accessing cultural and traditional ways of healing can support their well-being journeys. Unfortunately, oftentimes these are not considered health care, so they are not covered. In some cases, they are also not available. Community leaders have shared that they'd like to see Veterans Affairs Canada adopt a policy that allows for traditional healing approaches within communities, with those costs covered.

That was the first theme.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: We have about 30 seconds left to address the other two themes.

I would ask you to be brief.

[*English*]

Ms. Meriem Benlamri: The second theme we heard was that trust needs to be built and earned.

The third one was that there needs to be more clarity around the provision of mental health care. It's not always clear to indigenous veterans who is responsible for coverage. Is it federal entities or is it provincial or territorial health coverage? It would be helpful for folks to get more clarity and support in navigating the system.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Ms. Notarianni and Ms. Benlamri.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney, you have the floor for six minutes, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I will go first to the Last Post Fund.

Thank you for being here. I really appreciate the work being done. I think it's really sacred work. Thank you for doing that.

I'm wondering if you could talk to us a bit about what work you've done on creating a culturally safe framework for the processes that unfold. I think it's really important for us to see how indigenous-led projects are addressing issues so that we can talk about how other organizations might do the same. That would be really helpful for us.

Second, how do the connections get built to identify where the unmarked graves are? I know that a lot of communities are very remote. I imagine the funding to get to some of those locations might be challenging. Could you talk a bit about that and about whether that limits your ability to do the work?

Ms. Maria Trujillo: I'll start off with your second question, because I have more in mind to say about that, and then I'll move on to the first one.

The way we have contacted communities so far, mostly as a result of COVID, has been through phone and online meetings. I first approach the band office, and usually it's the lands department. There's a lot of work being done on cemeteries in communities. It varies, of course, in each community, but it tends to be done by the lands department. Usually they have a plan in place for where the veterans might be buried, and they share that with us.

One of the components of the indigenous veterans initiative is that we provide an honorarium for a member of the community or the band office itself to carry out the research on identifying the unmarked graves of a veteran on our behalf. Out of the 45 communities we've worked with, about half have had a researcher. That person is crucial to the work we do, because they identify who is missing a grave marker. They'll also help us find the traditional name of the veteran when it's available.

Thanks to technology, it's kind of worked so far. We haven't necessarily had to go to any community so far to let them know about this work. I would say we're lucky when a community has veterans, as there tends to be a veteran culture in that community. We're connected with people who already work on the Remembrance Day committee or somebody who honours the veterans. Usually that person is already interested in the work we do, so we've been lucky in that sense.

Where it's been tricky, I think, is if there's less of a culture of Remembrance Day in a community. There isn't really a key person to go to, so that's one of the challenges, even though there might be veterans buried in an unmarked grave in that community.

That's in regard to the second question.

As for the first question, when we started this work, families were asking us for.... One of the components is that, if there's a culturally relevant symbol, the family has the choice to add it on the tombstone. This is different from non-indigenous veterans, where we usually offer the cross or a military crest. For indigenous veterans, if the community has a symbol or if the family themselves belong to a clan or have a family symbol, then we definitely allow and encourage the family to go with that symbol if they like.

One of the gaps we noticed is that the families were asking for a certain type of symbol, but we didn't really have any in stock. One of the ways we tackled this was by hiring a Cree artist, who created seven symbols based on the seven sacred teaching symbols. These are offered to family as one of the choices they have if they would like to add them. It's been popular. Many families ask for eagles or a feather, and those are already available through the symbols we offer.

Related to culture and a big component of the program is adding the traditional name of the veteran. It's retroactive, so if we've placed a tombstone in the past and did not add the traditional name, we'll go back and add it. It's for any new tombstones as well. The family also gets the choice of where that name is placed. Usually we follow the name, rank and unit, but sometimes the family wants the traditional name above the English name, and that's completely fine as well.

We try to work with families so the tombstone is as beautiful as they envision it to be. I would say that's how we tackle that.

● (1125)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's perfect.

I have only a few seconds, so I'll ask one quick last question.

In B.C., a Cree designer wouldn't necessarily be the right style. If a clan emblem has been made by the community, is that something you can add to the tombstone?

Ms. Maria Trujillo: Yes, definitely. We had a family that did their own drawing, a pencil drawing. We digitalized it for them. We had a really beautiful one installed in a cemetery in Victoria, and it was drawn by a nephew of the veteran. We were super honoured to have that emblem on the tombstone.

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

Now let's start the second round of questions. I'm pleased to start with MP Terry Dowdall for five minutes.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here today. It's great to have all of you back.

My first question goes to the Last Post Fund.

There was an article out in November, basically a month ago, and your past president, Derek Sullivan, was quite concerned about how the National Field of Honour was going to continue the way it is. It said, “Since 2020 there’s been a push for VAC to assume ownership of the site.” On September 4, your organization sent a letter to Minister Petitpas Taylor basically outlining, “the future of this Veterans' cemetery is now in serious jeopardy; current operating deficits mean that the LPF can sustain operations for only a short period of time.”

The letter went out September 4. There was no strike at that time, and you were hoping to have an answer by November 11. You thought that was a good time, with it being Remembrance Week, but no letter was received. The only time there was contact with her office was after CTV News phoned and followed up on that, and they were told that she was looking at and assessing feasibility.

Number one, I'm just wondering what that says about urgency and respect. Number two, has there been any follow-up as of yet to see exactly what that study of feasibility is about?

● (1130)

Ms. Maria Trujillo: I specifically take care of the indigenous veterans initiative. I am aware that for the cemetery, the National Field of Honour, a request for transfer has been put through, but I can't really speak to it because it's not in my domain. That would be for the Last Post Fund president or the executive director, but they're not present. I don't want to say anything that is for them to speak to. I'm sorry about that.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Maybe you could ask them that or have them follow up, just to see whether a letter or something else has come back outlining the feasibility study exactly and any possible timeline. That would be greatly appreciated.

My next questions will now go to you, MaryAnn. Can you share with our committee how many homeless veterans live in Canada and how those numbers are reached?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: That is a great question because we know that's a concern.

I don't have that number top of mind. I don't know whether Meriem would either. We recognize that homelessness and housing issues for veterans is an area of significant concern, but I don't have that data personally.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Have you ever done a study to see exactly how many homeless veterans we have?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We've done a number of research studies. We haven't done any specific research on veteran homelessness.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Okay, so it has never been asked.

The government numbers are all over the place. Some people are saying 2,000; some say 10,000. It just seems like there's such a wide variety, but it's one of those issues for which you would want to know the number. I think that would be an important study.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: I don't have that top of mind. I don't want to speak for my team, which is more closely connected with some of the work that intersects those issues.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Over the course of this study, the committee has heard that indigenous veterans are at a higher risk of homelessness than other groups of veterans. Have you conducted any research on this, and why do you think this is the case?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We at Atlas have not yet conducted a study on indigenous veterans and their risk for homelessness. Our focus so far on work related to first nations, Inuit, Métis and indigenous veterans has been what Meriem outlined. We're working collaboratively to respond to knowledge needs and support mental health and wellness.

Based on what we know about some of the social determinants of health and what might contribute to people experiencing housing issues like homelessness, a lot of the issues we understand as social determinants of health might be factors there. We're hearing a lot about issues related to the housing crisis in Canada, and you're exacerbating that with things like systemic racism and so on, which I think has come through in testimony at this committee. I would venture to say those factors would all be at play.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Has no one reached out to you to study some of these issues, or give you a heads-up that this is what we should be looking into?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We do work to identify what research to undertake, and there are a lot of needs, actually. I think an important overarching message here is that when it comes to veteran family mental health, there are a lot of needs to look at, including in specific subpopulations of veterans. We address that. Indigenous and Black veterans are among the groups where more needs to be researched.

Is that time? I'm sorry.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: He's shutting us down.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Dowdall. Even though I'm pleased to give you the floor, your time is over. Thank you.

I'd like to invite Ms. Lisa Hepfner to the floor for five minutes.

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

I would like to go back to Madam Maria Trujillo. I lived in Honduras for a year, and there's a major city by the name of Trujillo there. Please let me know if I'm pronouncing your name incorrectly.

Your work seems really important for our efforts toward reconciliation. I'm wondering if you would comment on that. Do you agree?

● (1135)

Ms. Maria Trujillo: Yes, definitely.

Through our work, a secondary effect has been more recognition that so many indigenous veterans served in the world wars and continue to serve. We place tombstones in indigenous communities, non-indigenous communities and municipal cemeteries. A secondary effect of having a tombstone with an indigenous symbol and name in a municipal cemetery is it's a chance for non-indigenous Canadians to see how many indigenous veterans served. When someone walks by a tombstone that has a cultural symbol or an indigenous name and they aren't aware that so many indigenous veterans served in the Canadian Armed Forces, it's an educational moment for them. I think it serves to educate non-indigenous Canadians on the huge contribution indigenous veterans have made and continue to make to the Canadian Armed Forces. It builds a bridge in that sense. Reconciliation can also be an educative moment for non-indigenous Canadians.

Adding a traditional name is a very important component. We know traditional names and indigenous languages were banned in residential schools. Adding a traditional name to the grave marker is a way to hopefully reclaim history for the families who lost their traditional names and languages in residential schools. I think it's a small step. We know an important component of reconciliation is bringing back indigenous languages.

In summary, it creates visibility for the cultures that served.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It's very important work. Thank you so much for that.

I understand there's a documentary or film under way. Would you tell us more about that?

Ms. Maria Trujillo: It's a short documentary. It was released in 2022 thanks to generous funding from the Bank of Montreal. It covers the work we did with three communities: Kitigan Zibi in Quebec, Kawacatoose First Nation in Saskatchewan and a third one in the Northwest Territories, which was our collaboration with retired master warrant officer Floyd Powder.

The documentary serves to document the work we've done in those three corners of Canada. It captures, to an extent, how finding unmarked grave is tricky work, but it also captures the impact this has on communities. What I like about it is that we see the generational impact as well. We see that it brings communities together, including younger members of them. It gives them pride to see that their grandfather or grandmother served.

It's on our website. It's free and open to the public. If you want to see it, just google “the Last Post Fund”. It's under the indigenous veterans initiative. It's available for everyone to see.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I will make a point of doing that. Thank you very much.

I would like to turn now to Indspire and Mr. Shead.

I'm hoping you can talk to us a bit more about the challenges that many indigenous veterans face in the transition from military service, particularly in education and employment. Perhaps you have some suggestions or ideas on how the government can better support those veterans in their transition.

Mr. William Shead: I'll start with a suggestion. Governments, particularly the federal government, have tremendous bureaucracies that can identify problems, but I think they have difficulty delivering. The organizations that I find can deliver some of the needed services to indigenous people, including veterans...can largely be achieved better by volunteer organizations. For example, the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires has for decades been involved in helping veterans find employment and other needed benefits. There is the Legion as well, and all of the veterans' organizations.

They're close to the ground. Veterans are not concentrated in one particular locality. They're all over the place, so you need a volunteer organization to do the service.

● (1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shead. Maybe you will get other questions.

[*Translation*]

I will now pass the floor to Mr. Champoux for a short two and a half minutes.

Mr. Martin Champoux: I am going to try to be concise, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Trujillo, yours is a very important mission. I respect it and I admire it a lot. At the Remembrance Day celebrations back home in Drummond few years ago, I had a conversation with the widow of a soldier who died in combat, who was indigenous. She looked at the names on the cenotaph and said, "That's not his name. He didn't call himself that." It startled me a bit, because that definitely wasn't on the agenda at that time, but I thought it was a very important question.

You are doing very important work on the question of tombstones, in particular. You want to give indigenous members of the armed forces back the respect they are owed.

Do you intend to extend this mission? I gave the example of cenotaphs, but we also kind of need to respect and celebrate the indigenous origins of these people during their lives, during their years of service.

Ms. Maria Trujillo: Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

So far, we really just focus on providing grave markers. The question of cenotaphs does come up. What we usually do is redirect the community to the funds that are available through Veterans Affairs, such as the commemorative partnership fund, as I think it's called. Some communities have been able to get new cenotaphs or repair existing cenotaphs precisely for adding new names or new members, so we usually refer them to VAC for that.

At the Last Post Fund, our mission is focused on providing grave markers and our funeral burial program as well, but we do try to create a link between ourselves and our main funder, which is Veterans Affairs Canada, and the programs that Veterans Affairs offers in veteran communities for that.

I think that will be our focus for now, but we try to create links to see which other organizations are doing programs that we can maybe refer people to.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Martin Champoux: What you are doing is very important, and I congratulate you. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

Ms. Blaney, the floor is yours for two and a half minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I have a question or two for Atlas. I will let either one of you decide who the right person is to answer.

I've heard how broadly you try to get veterans to participate. One thing I would like to hear a little information about is how you address mental health issues. We know that some veterans have mental health challenges. I'm really curious about how the space is made safe for those veterans to express what they need to, while having the support and maybe the aftercare they may require.

The other question is about diversity. We've seen in this study that the voices of Black veterans are not coming out. I've talked to several people from that community, and there's a very clear resistance to coming out, which I found really concerning. I'm wondering how to make sure that when you're doing a study on veterans, the voices of indigenous people, Black people and people of colour are actually heard. How do you address that nuance? I'm just curious if you could talk about that from a research perspective.

● (1145)

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Both are very important questions. Thank you for that.

To the second question, in the research we do, for the most part we are actively trying to ensure we have diversity across all our studies, and there are ways to do that. I recognize, too, that there may be populations where there could be mistrust with research. It is so important that we build visibility and relationships by doing outreach, getting out there and growing our network, trying our best to ensure that there's diversity among our network so that, again, we can build on relationships and get the word out. Then people can participate and we have that diversity reflected in our studies.

With respect to how we do our work, our mandate is around mental health and working with veterans with the lived experience of PTSD and related mental health conditions and with their families. That's something we absolutely take very seriously in our work. We're bringing people to the table to inform knowledge products, as Meriem has spoken about, and to codevelop with us on often sensitive topics, such as intimate partner violence and military sexual trauma.

Perhaps Meriem can speak to some recent examples of what we've put in place, because there are trauma-informed strategies that allow individuals to provide feedback, though it is done in such a way that we're minimizing the risk of harm. When we engage these volunteers in that capacity, we often have opportunities to connect with a mental health resource so that when we bring people together for events, for example, we have that.

Perhaps Meriem wants to share more practical strategies.

Ms. Meriem Benlamri: Yes, for sure. I can speak to one example of a project we conducted in this fashion, which was about resources we developed related to military sexual trauma. We brought together a group of folks who either had experienced military sexual trauma themselves or were service providers providing care for those who had experienced military sexual trauma. We had the intention of creating informational resources around the topic, but we let them lead the way in telling us what exactly it was about military sexual trauma that the community wanted to learn more about.

That's one way we engage folks to make sure the content we cover through our resources is going to be relevant. They support us in identifying the subtopics that will go into the resources and how to disseminate the resources once they're ready so they can reach the people who need to see them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll to have the last two interventions of five minutes each, one from Mrs. Wagantall and the other one from Mr. Casey.

Mrs. Wagantall, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you again for being here with us today.

I'd like to follow up, MaryAnn, on your comments about funding. You indicated that you had some public partners and you specifically mentioned the Canadian institute for public safety. Is that what it was called?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: It's the Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. When did you do research with them? In what year was it?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We wrapped up a project with them. I may have to follow up on details.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I just need the date.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: We partner in ongoing and different ways, but I believe our peer support community network, the portion that was funded, has wrapped up or is wrapping up.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: What was the study on?

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: It wasn't a research study. It was related to convening a group with military personnel, veterans, public safety personnel, families and the peer support community and bringing together a community network with the purpose of creating some best practice guidelines for peer support within those groups. Those will be launching soon.

Ms. Meriem Benlamri: I can speak to another partnership with that group. In 2022, we also partnered with them to develop knowledge products specifically for public safety personnel on post-traumatic stress injuries. That was in 2022.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: That was done with a grant through the Medavie Foundation. It was a small time-limited grant.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It was not focused on the Canadian Armed Forces. It was for other service members.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: It was also for the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. That was 2022.

You also mentioned Health Canada.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: No, I was giving an example of funding. It was a Public Health Agency of Canada grant that CIPSRT and Atlas were doing work connected to, but I think our funding flowed through CIPSRT.

You'll have to forgive me if I'm not up on the details. I can always follow up with you.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: That's fine. Thank you. I appreciate that.

I have other questions that I would like to direct to the Last Post Fund.

The minister has indicated that she needed to do a feasibility study, and we're not sure where that's at right now. Is that something you would take on? I need just a yes or no.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: A feasibility study...?

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: It's in regard to whether or not the government should take over the responsibility for funding the National Field of Honour. The Last Post Fund is asking for assistance from the government to stay afloat.

● (1150)

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: Without having much context or time to think about it, that work sounds like it would be out of scope. It sounds more like program evaluation work or a feasibility study with respect to whether the government funds something. I think it would conflict with our arm's-length relationship with Veterans Affairs Canada.

Again, it's something I'm responding to for the first time, having not given it thought before.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I think if we're looking at something as important as these graves being maintained.... We're hearing about how indigenous graves haven't been marked and the effort going into making sure that's done properly, and here we have the potential, from what I'm seeing and hearing, of losing care for a very large cemetery in Montreal. To me, an independent study on the importance of that particular remembrance area would be really important so that we have a clear understanding of its value and the need for the government to take responsibility for it. That's where I'm coming from.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: That's fair. In our recent studies, for external partners, we've gone through a request for proposals process. The recent one we did had specific topics.

I will also share that we know from the community about the importance of that work and of commemoration. In fact, Floyd Powder was part of our inaugural reference group, which was an important body of volunteers who guided Atlas in their work. Our colleague spoke about him already. He's been engaged in that initiative.

I just want to offer my respect to the work that's being done with that too.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thanks. I appreciate that.

I'll ask a few more questions about the homelessness issue. This has been going on for a long time. No one can seem to come up with a number. I know there are people who go out on a particular day and look, but it is difficult to locate homeless people. A lot of them are very efficient at being homeless and at couch surfing as well. We can't really deal with the issue if we don't know the numbers.

Is this something you could do by reaching out to the multiple organizations across Canada that do work with transitioning veterans? Could we get that information to a point where we have a much clearer understanding of how many of our veterans are homeless?

At what point in time does it happen? Is it when they leave the service? We're hearing that quite often it's a decade later, when they have struggled through trying to transition and haven't succeeded.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: The issue of housing and homelessness among veterans is on our radar. We had team members attend the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness conference that took place here recently. We are aware of some initiatives. We've worked in different ways with VETS Canada, which provides some of the emergency supports to veterans who are at risk.

That's something we would like to look into more to see what Atlas's role might be on that topic, as it intersects with mental health.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I think it would be great for the committee to have any research you've done and your views, if you could provide that to us.

Ms. MaryAnn Notarianni: I can follow up with you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Wagantall. Your time is over.

I will go to MP Sean Casey for the last five minutes.

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

I'd like to bring Mr. Larocque into the conversation.

The opening statement you gave to the committee on November 28 probably provided the most compelling evidence we could imagine on the value of Indspire and what it represents.

I'll basically give you carte blanche to expand on whatever you wish, but I would appreciate if you would include a bit about your personal story, and how this fund has helped you become a law professor and a practising lawyer, as well as a continuing member of the reserves.

Mr. Yvan Guy Larocque (Board of Directors, Clinical Counsel, University of Manitoba Faculty of Law, Indspire): I'd be happy to. Thank you for the question.

I grew up in a small French Métis community in southern Manitoba. I wasn't very well off, like many Métis families. I knew that I wanted to pursue an education but couldn't afford to go to university, so I was very fortunate to be recruited into the armed forces through a Métis recruiter when I was 16. I joined the naval reserve when I was 16 knowing that I would receive some funding for my education and would have a job. I was very fortunate to join the naval reserve. I did my basic training when I had just turned 17, in Borden, Ontario.

The money I made working in the reserves and the tuition reimbursement the Canadian Armed Forces offered reservists helped me attend my undergraduate program. Also, I credit most of my success to the values the CAF instilled in me through basic training and through my work in various domains in the Canadian Armed Forces.

I wasn't aware of Indspire until a bit later in my education, when I had to withdraw from university because I couldn't afford to live on my own in the city and attend university. I actually went to work full time in the navy for a few years to save some more money to go back to school. At that time, I learned of Indspire and applied and received some bursaries, which helped me go back to school. I was very fortunate in that case to go back to university to finish my undergraduate degree in economics.

All the while, I was working in the reserves, sometimes as a full-time class B or class C member in various parts of Canada and sometimes as a reservist on evenings and weekends at my home unit. After I finished my undergraduate degree, I worked in the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Air Force for about four years full time before deciding to pursue further education and going to law school.

When I went to law school, I was a bit better off because I'd been working full time in the Canadian Armed Forces and was able to save some money, but I also relied on Indspire for additional funding. That helped me not have to work two jobs while I was in law school. I still worked one job in the reserves, but I didn't have to take on additional debt and additional obligations.

Indspire really supported me throughout my career. I was allowed to pursue education that I wouldn't have been able to pursue without both Canadian Armed Forces support and Indspire support. I'm very fortunate, and I credit both the Canadian Armed Forces and Indspire for the support and opportunities they gave me and for my success.

● (1155)

Mr. Sean Casey: We have about a minute left.

You're a Métis veteran with 23 years of service who continues to serve in the reserves, and that's exactly what we're studying here. It's about the experiences of indigenous and Black veterans. What advice do you have for the committee as someone who walks the walk?

Mr. Yvan Guy Larocque: Part of the reason we don't see as many indigenous people staying in the force is that there are not many of us in the forces to begin with. I think there's a lot of pride among indigenous veterans and there's a lot of history, but there's also a lot of bad history. That turns indigenous people off from joining the forces.

Obviously there's divisiveness in our country in relation to indigenous rights and the historic wrongs that have been perpetrated on indigenous peoples. I think reconciliation is the answer.

Being both a member of an indigenous nation and a Canadian is something to be proud of, and that needs to be instilled in young people. It also needs to be instilled in the public and needs to be part of the conversation around reconciliation. You can be both a member of an indigenous nation and Canadian. You can be proud of both and serve both your community and your country.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you for your service.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Wow. That was a great panel for the first hour. It was a good idea for members of the committee to invite those witnesses.

● (1200)

[*Translation*]

We have heard from MaryAnn Notarianni, deputy chief executive officer, knowledge mobilization, and Meriem Benlamri, director, knowledge mobilization, both from the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families.

We have also heard from Yvan Guy Larocque, board member, clinical counsel, at the University of Manitoba law faculty, and William Shead, board member, both representing Indspire.

And we heard from Maria Antonia Trujillo, project coordinator, Indigenous Veterans Initiative, representing The Last Post Fund.

We are going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes to bring in the next witnesses for the next hour.

The meeting is suspended.

● (1200)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: Ladies and gentlemen, we are resuming the meeting.

As part of our study of the experience of indigenous and Black veterans, we will be spending 30 minutes with Bouchard Dulyx Dorval, who is a veteran. He is testifying as an individual by videoconference.

Welcome, Mr. Dorval.

Ordinarily, witnesses have five minutes for their opening remarks. If you would like to address the members of the committee, I will give you the floor.

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval (Veteran, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, members of the committee. I have not prepared a speech, but I am happy to be here, because I have already learned several things. I did not even know about all the work being done to support us. I am learning a lot about the work that is being done and about what has already been done and what will be done in the future.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the meeting. This is an opportunity for me to learn about these facts.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorval.

One committee member from each party represented here will have the floor for six minutes and may share their speaking time with one of their colleagues.

[*English*]

I'll give the floor to Mr. Blake Richards for six minutes to start the questioning of Mr. Dorval.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): First, Mr. Chair, I understood we had another witness with us. Is that no longer the case? I'm not in the room, so it's hard for me to see.

The Chair: We were supposed to have Mr. Brian Prairie by video conference, but he cancelled this morning so he's not available. That's why we are going to stay for 20 minutes with Mr. Dorval and then have committee business right after.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that. It's sometimes hard to tell when you're here virtually.

I appreciate you being here today, sir. Thank you for your willingness to come speak with the committee.

I certainly have some questions for you. You didn't give a lot of comments in your opening remarks, so I will afford you the opportunity to do that.

One thing we've heard during the course of this study is that there exists within Canada's government departments and institutions systemic racism. Is that something you agree with, and why or why not?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: It's true. It's unbelievable.

Some hard work has been done to solve the problem, but I think there is a lot of work left to do. When I left the Valcartier base five years ago, we were already seeing change happening.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: What I would ask next is in the context of veterans. Can you identify specific issues that exist there, and can you identify any specific laws or policies in place that are enabling systemic racism within our departments or institutions?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: There are laws, but they are not obeyed. There are laws, tests, training, from time to time. I think the government is doing a bit for that.

The problem is actually the people working there. Sometimes, they look at the institutions as if it belonged to them, which means they completely block the road to an individual. It's as if we had no right to go there. At one point, I felt like a space alien in that army. But there are also good people.

It was a constant struggle. Even yesterday, I was wondering how I was able to bear it all and survive. It was unbelievable. I was an alien for quite a long time. When I was finally transferred to Montreal for the last six years of my service, that was when I felt the weight lift a bit.

I don't use the door like everybody else. That may be my personal journey. Even though I grew up in it, it was frustrating. Things happened to me that I talked about only when I filed a grievance. I could not even tell my family what I had experienced. I shed tears, but I succeeded. Nobody knew what I endured. I had to endure a lot.

Before I joined the army, I really wanted to be part of it. I had the adrenaline, the energy, of a newbie. I had to prove myself. In spite of everything, I grew up a lot, and I succeeded.

● (1215)

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: We're certainly glad to hear that.

Can you tell me how long you served in the forces? You mentioned that you felt there was a bit of a change.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: I served in the army for 19 years, and I left when I turned 60.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: You mentioned there was a bit of a change for you when you went to Montreal.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes, that's right.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: What changed there? Was it just people and personalities, or were there specific policies or laws that you saw change that helped to improve things?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: It may be because of being in an urban setting and because of my environment. There were more of us. In Montreal, there are definitely a lot more reservists than other things. It is also a more civilian environment. A civilian is still a civilian. People like the idea of working with a civilian, but they are still a civilian. It wasn't the same thing.

In Quebec City, I had to fight and walk around with my fists clenched all the time as if I were always at war with somebody. In Montreal, I didn't have that pressure. That is where I started to breathe a bit. The environment helped me.

In Quebec City, I filed one grievance after another and I always won. An African told me I had to stay to help other Blacks who were travelling the same road as me. He told me I had to stay because I had made it through, I had fought the battle. But I had to leave, because I had done my time.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: What year did you retire from the forces?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: It was April 17, 2019.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: In the five-plus years since you've been out of the forces, obviously you've been a veteran and would consider yourself a veteran. You are a veteran. Thank you for your service.

What has your experience been like as a veteran with Veterans Affairs or with the government? Have you experienced systemic racism as a veteran?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Excuse me.

Mr. Richards, I can give Mr. Dorval about 20 seconds more so he can answer, because your six minutes are up.

Mr. Dorval, you have about 20 seconds.

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Can you repeat the question?

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure. In your five-plus years dealing with Veterans Affairs or other government departments or institutions as a veteran, have you experienced systemic racism?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: No, that was not the case at all. It was excellent. It was wonderful. My years of service were good, and I am happy with them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorval.

I now give Mr. Sarai the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Thank you for coming back, Mr. Dorval. Can you tell us a bit about what kind of racism and challenges you faced while serving in the military?

● (1220)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: The doors were closed to me everywhere. When I joined the army as a driver, I already had a family and I already had a car. On weekends, I was the one who drove the other soldiers around. But when we got to the base, we had to pass tests again to get a military driver's licence. Everybody passed the test except me, when I already had a car. It was really just everything.

As a result, I often lost my cool. The doors were always closed to me.

I received disciplinary sanctions. A captain told me it was not possible for me to have a record like that with so little time in the army, barely a few months. I told him it was reasonable because I didn't pass when the others passed and I often lost my cool. For example, one time, I had taken a test, and when I went to get my licence, they told me I didn't drive well enough and they didn't want to give me the licence. Instead of signing the sheet, I ripped it up and threw it in a trash can. A warrant officer who was walking by asked me what I had done. I told him it was a test paper and I had failed the test and ripped it up, because I didn't need it and I was going to take the test again. So I got a disciplinary sanction.

I took another course at Borden. I encountered the same people and the doors were closed to me again. Everybody took their test during the week, from Monday to Friday. They made me take mine at 11:00 Friday night, so I could not take it over. Then they told me I had not passed the test and they didn't have time to let me take it again, and I had to return to Valcartier. It was the same person. That is when I broke down and cried.

I filed a grievance. I think the colonels took action and removed that person.

In a nutshell, all the doors were closed to me. It was a battle.

[*English*]

Mr. Randeep Sarai: It's good to know that when you filed a grievance, he was removed.

Tell me about the processes. You said they've improved. Perhaps you can let us know how those processes have improved. It's bad and sad that you had to go through this and get to the point where you had to report it, but can you let us know how processes have improved and how they could be improved even further?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: The chain of command looked at my file, particularly in Ottawa. Someone had sent my file, which included things I had written. In Ottawa, General Alex Tremblay—I will never forget that name—came to Valcartier with a convoy of seven or eight vehicles at noon before lunch. He asked for the battalions to be assembled, for everybody to go a spot where there was a helicopter. And then he told us that he was not proud of us, that this was not why we had joined the forces, that people were working. He said it was not possible to act like that. He lost his temper at everybody.

Ordinarily, when the commanding officer or the general goes somewhere, he salutes and he starts by saying nice things. If there is something to report, he does it after that. This time, however, the general just let his anger out, and then he left. Everybody just stood there.

That happened because my file had reached Ottawa and then there were people talking about it. In spite of what happened, they kept blocking my path. Nobody in the organization talked to me anymore. I had to change my job. They told me I had won, but I couldn't stay there and I had to change camps.

I went to see the BPSOs, the base personnel selection officers, to prepare for another job. Nobody helped me, because the major was familiar with my case and it was me against them. I had to do everything for myself, to retrain for another occupation. I went back to Borden to do another job. I didn't get the guidance that all the other soldiers got when they wanted to change jobs. They got guidance to help them. I did it all on my own as a corporal and I succeeded, as usual.

A lot of things got done after Gen. Tremblay got angry, when he came directly from Ottawa and shook up all the garrisons. I think it really helped. It is impressive to see what an individual can do.

They had me take my test at midnight. I had to write a passage, and the test was out of 45 points. But they took my paper and deducted 15 points, just to play mind games with me. So I wrote the test out of 30 points. I took my test. I filled everything out and I handed it in on time. There were a lot of people who weren't able to hand it in on time and passed, but not me. They told me the next day, a Saturday, that I would not have time to take it because they were leaving. They sent me back to Valcartier. I cried the whole drive.

I have never told my family anything before today. I filed grievances and I won but nobody knew. I am only saying it now.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorval.

Mr. Dorval, two more members will be speaking. Mr. Champoux will have six minutes to ask you questions.

Mr. Champoux, the floor is yours.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today, Mr. Dorval.

You served in the Canadian Armed Forces for 19 years. You left in 2019.

Is that right?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes, that's right.

Mr. Martin Champoux: You were transferred, and you finished your service at Longue-Pointe Garrison in Montreal.

Is that correct?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes. That's correct.

Mr. Martin Champoux: What did you do? You said you were a driver. What division were you in, exactly?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: I was part of 5 Service Battalion in Valcartier. After that, I worked as a soldier-technician, and that was when I returned to Montreal, after my courses.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Mr. Dorval, I want to thank you for being with us today to share your story with us. I have found it very interesting.

You use colourful language. I wasn't listening to the English interpretation, but when you said a few times that you had "*pété les plombs*", I was curious to know how the interpreters had translated that for our anglophone colleagues. I appreciate your giving us your unfiltered thoughts, Mr. Dorval.

You talked about your difficult experience over the years, and you told us a few things that struck me, particularly the fact that you felt a weight lift when you got to Montreal.

Was that a cultural thing? Was it simply because you had changed settings, a setting that was maybe extremely oppressive for you because of the circumstances? What was it that made you feel like a weight had lifted when you got to Montreal?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: In Montreal, things were simpler, not just for Corporal Dorval, but also for a Black person who arrives there whether they be a captain or anything else. After two or three months, I had to get out of there.

In Montreal, the approach is different, and it was also not the same mindset. It may be because there are a lot of Black people in this urban area, I don't know. Most of the people are civilians.

Mr. Martin Champoux: You identified more with the mindset or how you felt in an environment like Montreal.

Is that it?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes, that's it.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Right.

I imagine that was kind of what you were referring to, when you said you were a space alien. The reason you felt like you were not in your element at that time was precisely because you felt uprooted.

Have I understood correctly?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: No, it's not because I was uprooted, it's because they treated me differently. I didn't go through the same doors as the others. When I got there, they just plain kept me apart.

I was a driver. When the people in charge assigned jobs, to drive a 16-tonne truck, for example, they always sent two people. But when I was the one they assigned the job to, it was always just me doing it, when that same job called for there to be two people.

I did my job well, when and where required, but I was always by myself. I never had another team member when I did my jobs.

● (1230)

Mr. Martin Champoux: Right.

That is pretty significant.

Mr. Dorval, in the answers you gave to the questions asked earlier by my colleagues, I heard you talk about the difficulties you experienced during your career while you were in the service.

You also said that since you left the Canadian Armed Forces, you have been satisfied with the services you are receiving from Veterans Affairs Canada.

Is that what you said?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: That's right.

There are no arguments. I can't complain.

Mr. Martin Champoux: I find that very interesting.

It is rare for people to call us, us MPs, to say that the department isn't causing them any problems—it is giving them their benefits and compensation payments.

Generally, when people come to us, it is to tell us that something is not working—they are having trouble getting the money they are owed or getting the services they are entitled to.

In your case, did you have any special needs after leaving the Canadian Armed Forces? When you left in 2019, did you have any contact with Veterans Affairs Canada for particular reasons or to obtain special services?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: I think I had needs as a member of the Canadian Forces. The solution was already there.

And now, when I request services, like my pension—after all, I am 60 years old—I get them.

Mr. Martin Champoux: How old are you?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: I'm 64.

Mr. Martin Champoux: I ask you that because I don't believe you. You look a lot younger than that.

Voices: Ha, ha!

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: When I left the Canadian Forces, I think everything was already arranged when I approached the department. I just had to say what I needed.

I can't speak for anyone else, but, personally, I am really fine.

Mr. Martin Champoux: Thank you, Mr. Dorval.

It is refreshing to hear you. As I said, we never hear about things going well. We always hear about things going badly.

Your career was not without obstacles, but knowing that you are doing well now, that you get speedy and favourable responses to your requests, is nonetheless refreshing. I appreciate your taking the time to come and testify before us today.

Once again, Mr. Dorval, I thank you for your service to the country. That is something for which I have enormous respect. Thank you.

Thank you for coming to see us today.

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

Mr. Dorval, there will be one last speaker. This time, Rachel Blaney will be asking you questions.

The floor is yours for six minutes, Ms. Blaney.

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you, Mr. Dorval, for your information today. It's already been really helpful.

I thought some of the questions you were being asked about systemic racism and policies were interesting. I heard you say you were always at war with someone, doors were always being closed, the chain of command was very used to looking at you file and you were alone doing a task that was meant for two. To me, those are very good examples of systemic racism. It's built right in the system, and it's often invisible except to those who experience it. Thank you for putting on the record so clearly what that experience was like for you. That's extremely helpful.

I have a question for you. You said that someone—I'm not sure who it was—asked you to stay to help other Black service members. Could you tell us a bit about who asked you to do that and what that labour was like for you? What kind of work did you do in that area?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: The reason was that I was able to write and able to make a good argument. I knew how to write. At least, I had that skill. Ordinarily, there were people who sometimes made decisions that went against me, but when I presented my arguments, my report was a lot better. That helped me.

I always fought, and I always won, although a lot of others were not able to stay. To pass the test, I had help from a lieutenant. He helped me, him too, because he was kept in a lieutenant position for nine years. He was working in the same situation as me, and the path was also blocked for him. However, he had time to do a doctorate in administration over those nine years.

We worked together. He was the one who submitted my case, because he was an officer, while I was a corporal. I did the writing, and he submitted my cases. He was the one who told me that I had fought a good fight, but there were other people who would find themselves in my situation. He told me that I might be a good guide for those people, since I knew how to write and compose complaints.

I also worked on that skill, which was latent, over time. I was a warrior with a pen. I have continued to write. It is what I have done all my life. I have fought to keep my place.

● (1235)

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's an excellent skill to have, being a warrior with a pen. I'm really happy you had that, and I'm happy you were able to share it, although I think it shouldn't have been your responsibility. The system should have done better so that you wouldn't have had to fight so hard, but thank you for explaining that to us.

You said again and again that you were told you couldn't talk to your family about your grievance. I'm wondering if you could expand on that a bit. Who said you couldn't, and what was the rationale?

Not being able to talk to people you trust about a hard thing must be hard on your mental health. I'm wondering if your mental health was impacted by having to deal with this so consistently.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: I'm sorry, I explained it badly. It wasn't that I was told I couldn't do it.

When I went on a course at Borden for two and a half months, I had to take my test at 11:00 p.m., because they knew they were going to fail me. As well, the camp was dismantled on Saturday, and Monday was when graduation was happening. I was pushed aside, I was given the test as late as possible so I couldn't pass the test. But I didn't fail the test. The person who did that to me was happy to go on site to pick up all my things and put them in my car for me to return to Quebec City.

I cried while I was driving to Quebec City. I didn't dare tell my family why I was there and how I got there.

Monday morning, however, when I appeared in my battalion, Sergeant Vézina asked me what I was doing there. He told me I should be at graduation with the others. I told him I would not be there. He asked me why and I told him I had not passed the test. He was astonished and he told me I had gone to Borden to learn and when I came back I would be able to work. He said this was a formality and they had no right to do that to me. That was when they called the school and the whole process started.

Nobody told me not to talk about it, but I felt that it was shameful, humiliating and crappy to have to go through that as a soldier. In fact, when I was on an operation, some people didn't even call me by my title, they didn't call me "Corporal Duval". They called me "the Haitian". They flat out called me "the Haitian". It was revolting.

I was called all sorts of names. The only time I was really in the spotlight was when we played sports, when we played soccer, because I was good. I was the one who scored all the goals. That was when they asked me to play for the team. I showed off then. I went to the washroom, because I knew that was where I belonged. And then, all the others...

[*English*]

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I'm sorry, but I'm almost done.

Just to make sure I have it correct, was General Tremblay the one who helped, spoke to people and said, “Enough”? Is that correct?

● (1240)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes, that's right. I will never forget that name.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blaney.

Mr. Dorval, I would like to ask you a question.

In 19 years of service, were you ever sent outside Canada?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: Yes, I went to Haiti. That was where I got called "the Haitian". I was able to help out with some things because I knew people there. When we arrived, all the soldiers wanted to talk to their family, but we had to line up at the end of the day to get access to a phone. So I managed to find phones for everybody, and that made things easier for the soldiers.

The Chair: Thank you.

During those 19 years, did you participate in operations outside Canada in countries other than Haiti, your country of origin?

Mr. Bouchard Dulyx Dorval: No, I was supposed to participate in an operation, but I had injured my shoulder. My things had been sent to Afghanistan, but I had to stay behind to recuperate.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dorval.

You paved the way, as some of your colleagues did, and that was not wasted. Again, thank you for serving in the Canadian Forces. I wish you happy holidays.

That concludes this part of the meeting.

I want to thank you all for your contribution to this study of the experience of indigenous and Black veterans.

I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes.

● (1240)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1245)