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Chair

Mr. Rob Anders

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•(1600)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Brent St. Denis (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, Lib.)): I'm going to call to order this meeting of Tuesday, June 17, 2008, of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Our chair has been delayed a moment. I'm the vice-chair.

We're pleased to have as a witness, from halfway around the world, the Minister of Veterans' Affairs for New Zealand.

Sir, thank you so much for taking some time, with your staff, to help us understand what New Zealand is doing and has done for its veterans, as we attempt to do a better job here in Canada on behalf of our veterans of the great wars, including Korea, and for the new generation of veterans who are arriving on the scene as they leave the military every day.

Mr. Barker, with that, I would ask you to speak for whatever period of time you think is appropriate.

I will leave the chair and Mr. Anders will take over.

Thank you, sir.

Hon. Rick Barker (Minister of Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives of New Zealand): Thank you, Chair and committee. It's a special feeling of privilege and pleasure to be talking with you here today. If you go around the world, as I'm sure you have done, to the Western Front and other places, you'll see memorials to our soldiers: Canadians, Australians, British, and New Zealanders all together. So we have not only a common historical link, but we have common bonds through the defence of our freedoms. As a consequence of that, we are wrestling with some of the same issues as we go forward into the future.

When you say you want to do your best and do better for the veterans you have who are still with you from the Second World War and Korea, that is exactly the same as our agreement here in New Zealand. When you are acknowledging that you as a country are creating veterans every day, and many of them are in uniform, and you're looking to provide a lifelong system of care for them, that is exactly the same as what we have here in New Zealand.

The New Zealand starting point, though, I think would be slightly different. Our war pension system is quite unique. There are no restrictions on the type or the number of disabilities that can be applied for. Veterans can make an application for any disability they believe to be attributable or aggravated by their service.

The decision-making in New Zealand in the war pension system works on the basis of the reverse onus of proof, which simply means

that if service cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor, the pension is awarded. There are a number of conditions that people pick up as a consequence of the war that you can't identify; therefore, we cover them. Obviously if a person walks down the street today in civilian life and falls over and breaks their leg, they're treated as an ordinary civilian, but if they do have some consequences of service, we will award them a war pension.

The strength of the system—and I guess some would say its weakness—is that until about two or three years ago the New Zealand government did not recognize that our veterans in Vietnam had been in an area that was sprayed with Agent Orange, so there was no official acknowledgement that they were working in a toxic environment. Despite this, Veterans' Affairs awarded war settlement pensions to people who had been in Vietnam or Agent-Orange-related conditions. So on one hand we have one system saying this did not happen; yet on the other hand, because of the reverse onus of proof, people were awarded pensions and being taken care of. I think that in itself is one of the strengths of the system.

Once a war pension is awarded, it's not permanently fixed and it can be reviewed at any particular time. It could be that the condition the veteran has deteriorates. They can then go for a review, and if the pension is found to be inadequate, it can be increased. For veterans who are seriously disabled, there are applications for additional pensions to help support them. In New Zealand, a war disablement pension is a lifetime entitlement, and it's tax-free.

Once a veteran has been awarded a war disablement pension, they get fully funded health care for any disability that is accepted as being attributable or aggravated by service. The addition I would make to that is that in New Zealand we do have a public health system.

In general, nearly all the veterans care would be provided through the public health system. But there are areas where—for example, prescriptions and doctor's visits—the ordinary citizen is expected to make a partial payment. For a veteran in these situations, the state will pay the full cost of the doctor's visit, the medications, and so on. A backup is that for something that is attributable to war service, if a person cannot get their operation done within the public system within six months, we simply pay someone to do it for us through the private system.

While the philosophy of the system is suitable to us, we recognize that the current legislation needs to be overhauled and modernized, because the current war pension system focuses on disabilities. It focuses on loss of limbs and so on. It doesn't pick up what we're understanding better to be some of the consequences of warfare, such as PTSD. Although people do get treated for it, it's not specifically or generally dealt with as a condition that comes from events in a modern war theatre—for example, Agent Orange and other difficult-to-identify conditions.

• (1605)

So we want to modernize the legislation, and we want to see that the general things of a physical environment, which are not yet determined but which could impact on veterans in the future, are taken into account. The review is being undertaken by the New Zealand Law Commission, and I believe they have looked at the legislation and the framework in Canada. We're always up for stealing ideas. I guess we're no different from anybody else. When we find good ideas, we want to have them.

One of the other things we do, I think particularly well, here in New Zealand is to take care of our older veterans. The emphasis is on providing services to all the veterans to keep them in their homes as long as possible, and this is done by providing government-funded assistance to support the veterans in their own homes. The program is run through Veterans' Affairs by a case management system. The case manager works with a variety of providers to put the services in place. I don't know if you have it there in Canada, but there are a series of small owner-operated businesses run throughout New Zealand such as "Hire a Hubby", short for "Hire a Husband", and if you can't get something done, you can ring them up and they'll come around and fix the window, fix the door, or fix this or that, and you simply pay them for the service. There are other providers similar to that.

To give you a case in point, if we have a veteran who's struggling at home because the toilet is not working properly and other things aren't working properly, and they can't fix them, they may be forced through these small decaying problems in their house to go to a rest home. We will send someone around to fix those. We don't do this for our senior citizens, our superannuitants, but we do it for our veterans. And we work very closely, very often, with the veteran's spouse, who has been probably their best case manager and case worker and support person throughout their life.

I want to talk a little bit about the framework and care for our veterans. The primary reason for making these changes is that, like Canada, we're going to be facing quite a change in the overall profile of our veterans. We still have the last group of veterans in New Zealand with us, those from the Second World War. There was a surge with Korea. We have some from the Vietnam War, but after Vietnam, New Zealand had very few deployments. This changed in the 1990s, and New Zealand Defence Force personnel have been in a range of peacemaking and peacekeeping deployments around the globe. Currently, the breakout is that approximately 20% of our veterans are from the Second World War, and then the other large group are veterans who are still in uniform, who make up about 11% of the veterans population.

For New Zealand, the care of veterans is effectively in two places. The first is Veterans' Affairs, which was a relatively small organization or department that was between the Department of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Defence. Having it split was seen at the time as a good idea, because most of our social welfare and other payments are made through the Ministry of Social Development. Defence was there because the veterans obviously had long-time connections with Defence, and there were other arrangements that needed to be put in place.

We just reviewed Veterans' Affairs, and we had a clear choice between putting it with the Ministry of Social Development or going for Defence. In the end we have decided to put it with the Ministry of Defence, for a number of very key reasons. First is that for the foreseeable future, all future governments in a democracy will rely upon volunteers for their defence force. It's difficult to see a situation in the future in which we are going to be able to have mass conscription, as we saw in the First and Second World Wars. Therefore, if we are going to have young people volunteer, they will need to be convinced about the value of a career in defence, and a very critical part of that will be how the veterans are treated.

• (1610)

On the problem we had in looking at veterans and how we dealt with issues, I felt that the treatment we had provided to the veterans of the Vietnam War was very telling. The veterans from the Vietnam War came home. It was an unpopular war, and once they had left the gates of the military establishment and been demobilized and put into civilian uniforms, the military said that was the end of their responsibility. They then moved on and became the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development for the payment of war pensions and war disablement pensions.

I felt that this shift created a problem for our veterans, because the case of the Vietnam veterans was that they were constantly arguing that they had been exposed to a toxic environment. They were critical of the case because they had simply been brought home to New Zealand by plane, changed out of their uniforms, put on a bus or a train, and sent home. There was no process of demobilization and no support for them after the Vietnam War. This created a long, lingering, and very bitter standoff between the Vietnam veterans and the New Zealand government.

I'm pleased to say that in the last few weeks we have had a welcome home ceremony for the Vietnam veterans. We put in place a package of supports for the Vietnam veterans in terms of a memorandum of understanding. The Chief of Defence Force Mateparae has offered the Vietnam veterans an unreserved apology for their treatment, and we have resolved that issue.

It seems to me that if you are going to make someone responsible for the veterans, you have a choice between the chief of defence force and the Ministry of Social Development. The veterans themselves who have been in uniform for a long time look to the military and always see themselves as members of the military. That's their natural home. So we have made Veterans' Affairs a unit within the defence establishment and conferred upon the chief of defence force a lifetime duty to care for our veterans.

Whatever happens to the person in service from the point when they are demobilized and leave the service for the rest of their life in the community will be linked to the defence force. This makes it very clear that over time we will have a different approach to the treatment of veterans than we have today. By strengthening the responsibility of the CDF force, we will have an improvement in the way these people, the serving personnel, immobilize from the military, because the CDF will realize that once they leave they will always be his responsibility. This will overcome quite a number of very serious problems I've seen, where the line between the military and the veteran is where things are disjointed. The information isn't collected properly or handed over properly. There are various problems in this area, and I think this will solve them. That's simply New Zealand's view of it.

I've talked about all of life, the problems we have to overcome, the transition from military to civilian life, and the promotion of well-being. In looking at a review of the War Pensions Act in the future, one of the key things I have asked the war commission to do is look at the issue of how we rehabilitate veterans in the community. One of the problems I see when I look at regimes other than our own is that very often we have under-emphasized the value of rehabilitation, and after leaving the military, veterans are unable to look after themselves and get work. They have become quite litigious in trying to get bigger war disablement pensions and crank themselves up the system. They do this because they are looking to get sufficient money to look after themselves.

• (1615)

I think we here in New Zealand have been weak in the area of rehabilitation, and this is one area where I want to see us strengthening ourselves. I've been very interested to read and hear of what you've been doing in Canada in the area of rehabilitation, and I would say that in my summation you are well ahead of the rest of us in this area. If what I have read and heard is correct, you are certainly ahead of us, you're certainly ahead of what I understand is the case in Britain, and certainly ahead of what I understand is the case in the United States and Australia. So we're looking at you to learn about rehabilitation and to improve on our own services to veterans.

To come back to the point I made earlier, in the future, our ability to recruit young men and women to the military will be on the basis of volunteers who join, and part of the decision-making will be greatly influenced by the way in which we treat veterans. If they see veterans in their communities not well looked after, this will greatly influence their decision and we will not get the quality of people we need for the military today. It's not a simple job any more; we need the very finest young men and women that we can recruit to be our soldiers for the future.

Any questions?

The Chair (Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC)): Thank you very much. I would just like to thank my colleague, Mr. St. Denis, for starting the meeting.

Now what happens is we go to a first round of questions. Usually it's for seven minutes, but not always, and then after that we open it up to a second round of questions for committee members where they have five minutes apiece.

First I will go to Mr. Valley of the Liberal Party of Canada, the official opposition, for seven minutes.

• (1620)

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you for taking the time to join us today. We know there's quite a time difference, and it's good to be able to have a chance to speak with somebody who has your credentials. You've had a long history as a politician, a long history of serving different ministries, so it's a good opportunity for us to have a discussion with you. I also see that you were just recently over here. In May, you were at the summit that was held in Washington. So thank you for all that.

I'll go right to questions. One of the things we've noticed, especially as we've been interviewing individuals from around the world, is that in the world of veterans affairs things are changing. As you said, many of the countries we've talked to have changes just coming in, because it's clear that things are changing for our veterans. They're becoming much younger as they're leaving the forces; they're becoming much more sophisticated; they know how to use the tools that are there. We're hearing that from every country, and we've just heard that there are new policies coming in to your country.

One of the challenges we have, as we work at our studies, is that we're trying to get to the day where we have a seamless transition from being in the uniform to being in civilian life. As we've crossed Canada in our meetings at different bases, we've met with a number of individuals. And we know it probably goes well sometimes when you're physically well and your mental health is good, but in situations where there's mental stress and there's post-traumatic stress disorder, all these other challenges are making it very difficult for our veterans to move to civilian life.

You mentioned some of that in your discussions with us already, that there are gaps. We see that in Canada as one of the larger gaps. We also have the difficulty of trying to get enough health care professionals who can look after them, both in the service and in private life through contract workers.

I'm just wondering if you want to elaborate a little bit on that, as they try to move from one life to the next. Are you encountering some of those similar problems?

Hon. Rick Barker: I will just respond to you and say yes, I agree with your analysis that things are changing rapidly. Not only young people, but we're getting a lot more women in the military, and I think this is going to have another effect on us, which we can't quite yet identify.

The relationship between the military and those serving has changed over time. People are no longer content to entirely accept the "I say, you do" philosophy and that it is simply about service to your country. There's much more about the individual and care for the individual.

I agree with your issues about a seamless transition. That's one of the areas that we're very keen to overcome.

In terms of getting health care professionals, that is always a challenge. I'd like to say that, so far, we haven't really found a problem that we can't overcome with that, but the principal problem for us has been getting many of our veterans to accept that they have PTSD and to take care. That has been our real problem.

So one of the things we are really interested in doing here is issuing people a card with a chip in it when they leave the military so that every time they come into contact with the health service, we can pick up the data and can track them through the system and see what's happening over time. On the basis of this information, we will be able to have analysis of what's happening to each cohort as it goes through.

At the moment, we're flying blind. What we are lacking is information. We want to have this seamless connection between the military and what they're doing in civilian life, so that we have access to the records and can catch all that information and work with the veterans' cohorts through the services association to identify problems as they emerge and then be able to respond to them.

We do not have enough information, in my view.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

That's one of our major problems in a country as large as this one. I serve an area in northern Ontario, a vast, vast, remote area with very few people. We lose track of our veterans, and we're not allowed access to information, due to certain laws in our country, on where they are. We are constantly trying to reach them.

It will be interesting to watch how your card system develops. As a member of Parliament, I'd love to be able to contact my veterans in my riding. That's my job, providing that on-the-ground service that we do back in the ridings. But we have a huge problem trying to find out where they are. If they need us, they can come and find us, but we're not even there to be able to contact them.

I know you do have remote areas in New Zealand, so I assume it's similar there. Sometimes they simply disappear off the face of the map.

Hon. Rick Barker: That's true. We have exactly the same situation.

That's why we feel that by giving the veteran a card, a unique identifier, when they leave the military, we will be able to follow them for the first time through the system. And if we explain to them what we're trying to do, that we're trying to help veterans and their

families, to help all of the veterans, I feel they'll have a commitment to it and they'll allow the system to collect the information. But we have never explained this to people; we have never asked them, because we haven't really been that interested. So I think it's time for us to be interested and to say we want to do the best for them. In doing that, we will demonstrate to the wider public that we are caring for our veterans and therefore we will be able to continue to recruit high-quality, high-calibre young men and women for the services.

• (1625)

Mr. Roger Valley: I like to hear that, and I especially like to hear the passion in your voice for that.

Lastly, I know this had been raised by some of my other colleagues, but we think that part of the way to opening the door to veterans, especially the ones who are struggling with issues, is through the family. Even if we were able to talk to the family, they would be able to get to us and help us. We know the sooner we contact them, the sooner we're going to be able to do something and mitigate some of the damage that's been done by some of the issues they've been through in the military.

We're going to have a huge focus on the families. All together, it's all about getting the information and getting them to actually seek the help when they need it. If they don't need it, fine. But if we can find some way to do it...

We'll be watching your situation closely. Thank you.

Hon. Rick Barker: I would just respond to you and say I think you're exactly right when you talk about the family.

Just across the road from me is an old guy who went to the Second World War. He was on patrol in North Africa, came home, and has been on patrol on my street. He had a fall or an accident, so I went over to see if he was okay. I talked to his wife Margaret. Now Margaret has actually been his caregiver since he came home in 1945; she has provided all of the support. She's been a registered nurse and has done everything for him. I think she is not atypical: "Margarets" will be everywhere; "Margarets" have looked after the veterans.

With the Vietnam veterans, when we invited them to a welcome home ceremony, we invited all of their families: the moms, the kids, and the grandkids. And the families made the thing, because they had carried the veterans.

Like you, I feel that instead of focusing just on the veterans, we have to focus on the family, and by drawing the families in, we'll draw in the support for them and we'll get a much better result for everybody.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're on to the Bloc Québécois, and Monsieur Perron, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Mr. Minister, ladies, thank you for being with us. I will start by letting you know where I stand. To the extent I can, I try to focus on young people with post-traumatic stress disorder; I have choose to call it a psychological wound. I feel that it is just as much a wound as a bullet to the shoulder or the loss of a leg, except that the injury is to the mind.

Do you have percentages, or statistics, showing how many veterans suffer from psychological wounds?

[English]

Hon. Rick Barker: Not for the young group, no.

I agree that PTSD is an injury, just like a physical injury, and it needs to be treated. I would also say to you that the amount of PTSD suffered by our veterans is larger than we anticipate. We certainly don't have the information to qualify it, but I think it's a much wider problem than we know.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I assume that, like us, you have professionals, like psychologists and psychiatrists, who research and study the topic. Here, fortunately, we have Ste. Anne's Hospital in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, a veterans' hospital specializing in psychological wounds; it does wonderful work. But we still have a long way to go before we get to a perfect solution. In your remarks, however, you said that you tend to keep your veterans in their homes, in familiar surroundings, for as long as possible to give them the best chance at recovery. This is an approach that seems to be gaining ground in Canada, but I have reservations, fears perhaps, about how we are going to find the professionals to provide the necessary assistance. These people have to be trained. Are they going to receive adequate training in military psychology? These things worry me; I do not know if they worry you too. If so, do have you any insights you can share with us?

•(1630)

[English]

Hon. Rick Barker: The first thing is that we don't have a specialized hospital. We are a relatively small country, scattered over quite a long area. Centralizing resources into one point would cause us more difficulties than it would solve problems.

We look for specialist services in our particular area. There are people who are skilled in psychology and counselling scattered all over the country. We go through each of those who have the capability to provide that type of care and ask them to undertake contract work for us with our veterans.

If there's no one in the local area of the veteran, we will pay the veteran's travel to counselling. Usually it will be on a weekly or a fortnightly basis until they get to a position where they are quite stable and the treatment is complete. So the treatment is either available in the local community or we transport the person there.

I am quite a fan of keeping people at home. We used to have places where we would send people who had, for example, addictions to alcohol or drugs. We would send them to an institution. They would get cured in the institution, but when they left and went

back to their home environment, there were other pressures on them. We found that the percentage of people who were staying cured was much less than among those who were being treated in their homes.

Nearly all of the alcohol and drug addiction services today treat people at home. They go to services in their local community. If you keep people at home, where their family is around and all the other support services are around them, the changes they make in their lives are in their home environment. So when the treatment is finished, they continue on in their home environment and there's no transition problem.

[Translation]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: I am getting to the end because I just have two minutes left. I agree that we have to keep them at home as long as possible. But, on the other hand, they absolutely have to have family support. That may be difficult because, in most cases, wives, fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters do not know the nature and the symptoms of the wound. So you almost have to educate the entire family or the entire circle of friends in order to provide adequate assistance. That is what concerns me.

You can comment or not, but those are my concerns, and I like to speak from the heart.

[English]

Hon. Rick Barker: The first thing I would say is that very often the person who has a psychological injury is the last person to become aware of it. The people who are aware of it first are the family members and very often the veterans who served with them, their friends. We have found cases of people who have had years with a psychological injury and, for example, the wife and the children have all grown up with it and just lived with it. But when the grandchild comes along, the grandchild says, "Well, grandad, why are you always shouting at me? Why are you always angry?" They'll talk to the grandchild differently than with our generation, and they'll say, "Well, maybe I need some help."

We get quite a number of older veterans coming in for treatment for PTSD who have had it for decades. The family members are the ones who will help bring about the changes. They are key to identifying it. They're key to helping manage it. They're key to helping the treatment program. The specialists guide people, in many cases, and help people identify how to change their lives, but I do believe the family members are critical to it.

The last thing I'll say to you about this is that the real problem for us here, particularly with, for example, our Vietnam veterans, is getting the veterans themselves to accept that they have an issue. That's our biggest challenge—getting them to accept that they need treatment.

•(1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to the New Democratic Party.

Mr. Stoffer, you have five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Minister Barker, it's a pleasure to be able to talk to you and your staff today, and may I say that your country is absolutely beautiful. I think Christchurch is one of the finest cities I've been to, and my daughter is a huge fan of the All Blacks. So keep up the great work there in the rugby world.

Sir, I have several questions for you, and may I say it's very refreshing when a minister of the crown admits that they're not doing well enough in a particular department. It's extremely refreshing that you admitted that, and I know that you're going to continue to work to improve those systems.

I have several questions for you. I'll ask you four or five questions and then I'll give you time to answer.

What is your definition of a veteran in New Zealand? What is the Veterans' Affairs budget? Approximately how many veterans do you have? My final question for you is about Margaret, who is looking after that gentleman who you talked about. If that gentleman passes away, are there programs in place to assist Margaret in order for her to stay in her domicile for the rest of her natural life?

Go ahead, please, sir.

Hon. Rick Barker: Can I start with Margaret? I have to say that we don't do enough for Margaret, and that's one of the things I've asked the Law Commission to look at when we do the rewrite of the War Pensions Act. We're going to change the name of it to the Veterans Act to reflect what it really is. It's not about pensions. We want it to be about veterans and to focus on a much more holistic approach to veterans. Part of that is the family and the spouse. We do a little bit to help spouses, but in my opinion, it's not enough. They are the ones who carry the burden more than anybody else.

I'll ask Fiona to talk about the veterans numbers and the definition of a veteran.

I can say that the budget for Veterans' Affairs New Zealand is relatively small because of our system. All of the war pensions, the war disablement pensions, are put through the Ministry of Social Development budget, so we don't see that as money coming in here. Nearly all of the money we spend on veterans for health care comes out of the health budget, so we don't see any of that in Veterans' Affairs. Unlike the U.S., which has its own separate hospitals, all of our veterans health care is done through public health.

Regarding housing, I would say to you in all honesty there's not a veteran in New Zealand who doesn't have a house. If there were a veteran who didn't have a house, we would have a house for them tomorrow. All of our social housing is looked after through the Ministry of Housing New Zealand, so they'll get a house.

Many of the things veterans get are distributed right through the state system, so it's very difficult for me to qualify and say how much we spend on veterans, other than what we have in the Veterans' Affairs budget. But we'll give you those figures.

Now I'll ask Fiona to give you the definition of a veteran. This is Fiona Macrae. She's my number one adviser and guide on all these things.

Fiona.

Ms. Fiona Macrae (Deputy Director, Veterans' Affairs, House of Representatives of New Zealand): In New Zealand the definition of a veteran is somebody who has had service in a war or an emergency. Just having been in uniform doesn't make someone a veteran. So, for us, it's World War II, British Commonwealth Occupation Force Japan, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, and then the smaller UN deployments. So where we deploy people, rather than just being—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: May I interrupt for one second? If I'm a young person and I sign up for the New Zealand military, and I go into basic training and become seriously injured in that basic training and can no longer serve, would I be considered a veteran?

Ms. Fiona Macrae: No, you wouldn't. We have an excellent state-funded compensation system in New Zealand. If you have an accident in uniform and you are not in a deployed situation, you are covered by excellent compensation, which has an earnings-related compensation component as well as injury assistance.

Hon. Rick Barker: It also provides you with lifelong care. The one point I would like to make about that is that ACC provides accident compensation—it provides lump-sum payments and other things. But we have had some very heart-wrenching cases. For example, people have come to Parliament and said that whilst they have ACC, that's okay, but they were burned in a tank they took out on an exercise and are covered with all these burns. They feel that ACC hasn't adequately compensated them for this, because they were under orders and were doing things they might not otherwise have done. So the military now has, in addition to accident compensation, an insurance-based scheme to make payments in addition to whatever the state provides through ACC to compensate for that. If you were just in uniform, served in a training camp, and did all those things, and you haven't been settled with, you are covered as an ordinary citizen.

•(1640)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: What is the number of veterans you have?

Ms. Fiona Macrae: We don't know for sure, because of our inability to collect data, but we estimate that it is about 30,000 to 40,000.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much.

Hon. Rick Barker: Some of our veterans have headed off overseas. Some are in Australia. Some are in the States. Some are in Canada. Some are in Britain. We don't know where they've all gone. They're enjoying the freedoms they fought for, and they have exercised them and have gone. One of the things we have to do is keep better track of them.

With our veterans conference, one of the things I've asked the officials to look at is how we can better help veterans who migrate from each of their countries to the other. We should offer services and support, for example, for Canadians or Americans who come and reside here in New Zealand, on a reciprocal basis, and try to look after our veterans. I think if we do that, we'll provide better care for our veterans across the board. I'm not saying....

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The next time we speak, I hope you bring some lamb chops with you.

Hon. Rick Barker: I will. And I want to say to you, sir, that you have a remarkably intelligent and very wise daughter.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Now we're over to the Conservative Party, which is the government, and we'll have Ms. Hinton for seven minutes.

Mrs. Betty Hinton (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Good morning to you, Minister Barker. It's late in the afternoon for us.

I must tell you, before I begin, that I'm quite impressed with the workload you carry. I've looked at your CV, and you're not only the Minister of Veterans' Affairs, you're the Minister of Courts, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Minister of Civil Defence, and the Associate Minister of Justice. I'm the parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and I am very grateful that he does not carry all these other portfolios. I can't imagine what that would be like.

With regard to some of the things that were said earlier, Agent Orange is an issue that we resolved fairly early in the mandate of this government—probably not to everyone's satisfaction, but it was something that had not been resolved for many years, so we took care of that.

There was another comment made that I would like to clarify for you, so you don't leave with the wrong impression. Our government knows where our veterans are, but because of privacy issues, we don't disclose a list of veterans to individual MPs. As individual MPs, we have the ability to send to all our constituents any kind of information we want, and that includes veterans. It might not be satisfactory to all, but it's better than not knowing where they are, for sure.

We have a program in Canada we call the VIP program, the veterans independence program. You alluded to wanting to go down that same route. You sound like you have some of those parts in place already, if not all of them. We've managed to add another 24,000 "Margarets", if you will, in the last two years. We're very proud of that.

We'll have to talk about this off the air sometime, but I'm very interested in your Hire A Hubby program. That sounds very intriguing.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mrs. Betty Hinton: I'm also very interested in what you mentioned earlier. I think if I heard you correctly, it's not in place yet, but it's coming, and that is a card with a chip when people leave the military. One of the things we've discussed is that we don't want to lose anyone in the transition from active military to the veterans portfolio. That would be interesting, if you could answer that.

I'm doing all this talking, because he's going to cut me off, so if I ask you the questions, I'm okay.

One of your core values, as stated on your website, is to ensure consistency and accuracy. How do you ensure that services provided by the department are delivered in a consistent and accurate manner? That would be my first question.

• (1645)

Hon. Rick Barker: I'll put the question regarding the consistency and accuracy over to Fiona. She can talk a bit about that.

Obviously it's going to be impossible to get the same person to do the same job at the same standard everywhere across the country. We're at the mercy of individual providers. They're human beings; there are all sorts of variations in there. We set the standards we want and expect, and we monitor to make sure, as best we can, that we get those standards. But I have to say that there will always be variations.

Ms. Fiona Macrae: We contract the services. Through the contract service we set the standards we want against the cost, and then we monitor those contracts as necessary. There are variances.

We find that the best monitors are the veterans themselves, who follow it up. If it's not done to the standard they think it should be done, they will tell us. Sometimes they think it should be done to a better standard than the contract, and they've written to tell us that as well. We use that as part of the process, so we empower them. We're helping them but not taking their independence from them. We're empowering them to monitor the situation.

But we basically do it through a contract service.

Hon. Rick Barker: In Veterans' Affairs, the key thing is that a person has a case manager, one individual who will manage the overall handling of their case. There's one point of contact they can go to and say, "Well, this isn't working for me", or, if something new comes out, "How can you help me with this?"

I name a person they can contact, and that has improved our ability to provide services to veterans immensely. The wife or the partner knows who the case manager is and they can ring them up. So having a case manager has made a big difference for us.

Mrs. Betty Hinton: That's very interesting.

The other comment you made was that the department doesn't deliver the service. In Canada, our department does deliver the service. We don't contract out per se, the way I'm assuming you're talking about, so that's an interesting thing.

I was also very interested to hear you say that just having been in uniform doesn't make you a veteran. We've had a number of presentations where exactly the opposite point of view has been expressed, that if you served your country, whether you were deployed or you weren't, you're a veteran. So it's rather interesting to hear you say that.

In terms of needing treatment, are you saying that contact person in your country is the one who makes those decisions as to whether a veteran requires treatment, or is there another process in place?

Ms. Fiona Macrae: We use the veteran's general practitioner, in the main. The general practitioner identifies that the person needs medical treatment or assistance and can refer them to a specialist and work with the case manager to get the appropriate treatment.

Because the general practitioner has often dealt with that person for a long period of time and knows the family and health needs of the veteran in total, they make a good contact point to make those calls. We're not adding another person and stressing people out by having to retell their whole life story.

Hon. Rick Barker: Could I come back to the point about the definition of veteran and the issue that just being in uniform and being prepared to serve makes you a veteran?

In New Zealand, if you are in uniform and you're in service, you are treated similar to a civilian. If an accident happens to you, you'll go through the same system as a normal accident.... You'll have to show there was an event and a consequence of that event. You'll have to prove your case.

For a veteran who's done military service offshore.... We don't have much fighting in New Zealand; we haven't for 150 years, thank goodness. But for someone who's offshore, the theory is that you can be in a war zone and there's chaos. Things will happen to you for which there will be no medical record. The records might get lost. There could be a whole range of events that happen to you and the trail of proof is almost impossible. Therefore, we have the reverse onus of proof. We're saying that if you are in a conflict zone, we will give you a different standard or process to make these judgments by.

But if you're home in New Zealand and you have an accident, there's a doctor nearby, there are other people around—fire, crash—and all the reports can record it. And you're treated accordingly.

We give you a much lower threshold if you're in service, and that's what makes you a veteran.

• (1650)

Mrs. Betty Hinton: He's flashing me the card.

I'm going to ask a real quick question. What services or benefits are most utilized by veterans living in New Zealand?

Hon. Rick Barker: Fiona.

Ms. Fiona Macrae: Mostly home help. The biggest group of veterans we have served in World War II and the biggest service they use is home help. Lawns, housework, and things like that are the biggest services used.

Hon. Rick Barker: Perhaps I could just finish up on that and not cut into your time. I am from the Conservative Party. I've met Greg Thompson on several occasions. Just send him my personal warm regards, please, when you see him next.

The last thing I'll say to you is about the things I do as a portfolio minister. You need to appreciate that New Zealand is quite small, so you have to share the jobs around a bit to make things happen. So in this job are likely to be the sort of people...an intellectual butterfly. You can't last just sitting around for a long time because too much moves past you. You have to keep moving.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now on to our second round of questions, which are all just five minutes as opposed to seven. So now to the Liberal Party of Canada, the official opposition, and Mr. St. Denis, for five minutes.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you, Mr. Minister, for taking some time with us. I very much like this notion of reverse onus and where you distinguish those military personnel who have been in operations offshore and you lower the bar.

I'd like to talk a bit, though, about what we have in Canada. We have, as you may know, a large network of veterans legions. Do you have a network of legions or like organizations? They were started up after the First World War and grew again after the Second World War. Do you have a legion network?

Hon. Rick Barker: Yes, we do. The principal organization is the the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association. It covers the army, navy, and the air force. Within that you will find there are other groups. There will be groups organized around our deployment in Malaya, a group organized around Korea, a group organized around Vietnam, and so on. There will be different groups within that, but the group they all look to is the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Is that a non-profit, volunteer, charitable organization, or is there government funding support? What is the relationship, if any, administratively and financially, between the government and that return service organization?

Hon. Rick Barker: The RSA in New Zealand is an independent organization run and controlled completely by veterans. We are about to make a contribution to services they provide for us in the future, but we haven't to date. They're completely independent. On every move in Veterans' Affairs, I consult with the president of the RSA before I do anything. Before we made an announcement about the review of the War Pensions Act, I had long discussions with them, and we had a very clear understanding of what was going to happen. We had long discussions about the reorganization of Veterans' Affairs New Zealand, and we had agreement on that before anything happened. In the near future I'm going to have a meeting with the chief of defence—the RSA and I—just to discuss how things are going, what we need to do in the future. I consult very closely with them. No moves are made without talking to them about them.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: That's helpful to know. There would be a consensus, I'm sure, around this table that your RSA and our Royal Canadian Legions provide a huge volunteer resource. They are in many of our communities, in many rural communities. I think one of the things we'd like to do is find better ways, with their being willing, of course, to work with them and provide resources so they can help us with the next generation of veterans.

There is a concern, in our case, in Canada, that a lot of legions are becoming less viable financially because the old generation of veterans are passing on and the process of passing a torch out in the veterans community from the last generation to the next one requires support.

Do you know now what it is you hope to be doing with them? You talk about funding them to do something. Is there a specific program set up that you plan to work on with the RSA?

•(1655)

Hon. Rick Barker: There are two points to your question. New Zealand is in the process of making a transition. Up to the previous president of the RSA, all prior presidents were Second World War veterans. The last two were Vietnam War veterans. Even they say we need to be looking to the next generation of veterans to lead the organization, because the issues are more intense and complex, and they have to spend more time on the job.

New Zealand has RSA outposts in almost every town, and each RSA will have a welfare officer to whom the returned servicemen and women can go if they have issues about welfare. They will be about how they work in the home, those with respect to the War Pensions Act, and so on. I will help them with those.

So we're going to provide support, training, and other things to the welfare officers in the RSAs across New Zealand, in addition to the services we provide. They will see the people in their communities, know them, and have relationships with them that the state institutions, like Veterans' Affairs and others, won't have. They will be the best people to lead them to assistance.

We want to work with the RSA to make sure they have very good networks bringing the people in who need assistance, particularly with PTSD and so on. We want to help people and get them on side to help us help them.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: On the agreement that the RSA—or in our case the legion—infrastructure in the social economy is worth

supporting and complementing for the next generation, I don't know if the presidents of our dominion commands have served beyond the Second World War, but that would be helpful to know.

With that, Minister, thank you very much.

Hon. Rick Barker: You talked about lowering the bar, and I'll give you a very good reason why you should have a lower bar for those who have served than for those who haven't.

The perfect example for me is the Gulf War and what people identify as the Gulf War syndrome. The Americans have spent millions of dollars trying to research what the Gulf War syndrome is, and they have no idea what it is. They accept that people who have Gulf War syndrome are sick, and they take care of them.

If you had a normal standard of proof for people who went to war, you would not be able to help people who had Gulf War syndrome because you could not identify an accident, a cause, and a consequence. So I think having a lower threshold for those who have served in an area of conflict is absolutely essential.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll move to the Conservative Party of Canada and Mr. Shipley for five minutes.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Minister and your staff, for being with us in your morning and our afternoon for the study and analysis of what we're doing across veterans affairs departments.

I'll list three or four questions and let you respond to them.

You talked about information not being collected or handed out well. I'm assuming you're talking about some of the medical and personnel records that come from Defence that shift across the line when people become veterans. I'm wondering what you might be thinking about as future solutions.

Secondly, in Canada—and we have found this in discussions with other countries—there's the issue of red tape and the complexity of the forms individuals have to fill out when they need benefits or services. We're still looking for ways to simplify them and yet be efficient and effective. If you can give us some help on that, it would be wonderful.

You've included a very short version of a budget with some explanatory notes. We've asked Michel, our analyst researcher, to help out through the summer by comparing budgets of different countries. This will benefit not just us, obviously. Things have to work both ways. Hopefully other countries will benefit, as we do some sort of analysis of budgets on a comparative basis of services supplied, dollars spent, efficiencies, and those types of things.

I would like to be able to thank you in advance. Hopefully we can generate some information from you and return some information to you.

Finally, you mentioned that you have cemeteries. I'm wondering about the services provided and how long you have provided them.

There are a number of things there, but I would appreciate your response. Thank you.

• (1700)

Hon. Rick Barker: Thank you.

On the information, I'll ask Fiona to respond. That was question one.

And I'll ask Fiona to respond to your second question about forms. I will say that I find that our system is quite a bit different from other systems. With most of the systems I've seen, whether it be in veterans affairs or social welfare, there is a very high level of audit and paper trail required by the bureaucrats. The central agency wants to know how much money is spent on everything and to put ticks on every decision.

In New Zealand, we tend to delegate responsibility on a much broader base and to base it on trust. The agreement for the case managers is more general than you would find elsewhere. They have more delegated powers to make more decisions and therefore less paperwork.

I'll come back to Fiona, who can answer on the forms, and I'll leave Fiona to talk about cemeteries as well.

Ms. Fiona Macrae: On collection of information, as they align most of the defence force, that will give us better access to defence records. We're looking to digitalize information so we have that information regularly available to a number of decision-makers. The other thing with the digitalization is that if we can move on the chipped card, we can put medical records on the chip, so we have a copy with the person throughout his life, and we can add to it, as well as having it centrally stored.

Information is a big concern to us, not in terms of the quality of the records, but because most of them are paper-based. We need to move to a more digital format for some of the older records, to make them more accessible.

On forms, we too struggle to make sure things are as simple as possible, so that we are not asking for too much information but that we get enough. We will be training the RSA welfare offices to assist people to fill in forms correctly. They are another source within the community to assist people and help them through that.

With respect to cemeteries, since the 1920s we've had an arrangement with local authorities where they set aside part of standard cemeteries for ex-service personnel who have served in a

war in emergency. That's not just for New Zealanders; that's for any of our allies. They can be buried there at either no cost or a reduced cost. We provide subsidized memorials for them. They don't have to be war dead; they could just have served. We maintain those cemeteries for war graves through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. That's dealt with by our Ministry for Culture and Heritage, as a heritage issue. So we have two types of systems.

If you're a Canadian, a World War II veteran living in New Zealand, you could be buried in one of those services areas in a cemetery. Those cemeteries have flagpoles. On ANZAC Day they're used as places for the community to go to remember the service of the people who served, not only our country, but our allies. Schools often go there for history reasons, to identify different service. That's a community resource that we put quite a bit of time into as well.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Thank you.

The Chair: Now back to the Liberal Party of Canada and Mr. Valley, for five minutes.

Mr. Roger Valley: Thank you.

Minister, I'm going to go back to what we had a chat about before. It probably wouldn't surprise you that we don't always agree with each other around this table, and I disagree with my colleague that we know where all our veterans are. Many of our veterans aren't even registered, and that's part of the problem.

A witness: Oh, oh!

Mr. Roger Valley: I'm glad to see you have a sense of humour in the morning, because they're going to be after me after this.

Veterans move across the line, especially in our cities. There's no way for an individual MP to know exactly where they are. The addresses change. We can do a mailout to every household in our ridings and still miss veterans.

You talked about the idea of a card. That's something we need to follow closely, to make sure we know where our veterans are as much as we can. The problem is not the veteran who wants you to know where he is; it's the veteran who doesn't want you to know where he is. He's the one we can't find. He's the one, as you mentioned earlier, whose family recognizes this problem, but they can't get help. We need to have some way to contact them ahead of time and let them know we're a contact point, that we're a service they can use.

Quite often, and all my colleagues can attest to this, many people don't realize they can go to their MPs for any problem, especially at the federal-provincial level. They just try to do it all themselves. They get themselves into a worse mess by not coming to our offices first. That's the message I want to deliver to the veterans in my riding.

I can go to the local watering hole, the Legion, and I can meet with them and talk to them. They talk to their buddies and say, "Well, get a hold of Valley's office and talk to him." That's the only way we really have to contact them. There's no method other than that. Blank mailouts may not contact them.

We want to follow closely what you're doing, to see if there is a way we can reach out before there's a more serious problem.

•(1705)

Hon. Rick Barker: I agree with that. I'll just say on the information systems, which Fiona has alluded to, that they are all paper-based systems. There can be veterans walking down the street who walk into an office and say, "I'm a veteran", and nobody in the office will have a list of them. You have to go back to Defence, and say, I have Rick Barker here, who claims he's a veteran. Is this true? That sends them off to scurry through the records, to wade through the papers and blow dust off them, and finally they get some dusty file and say, well, yes, he is because he did such-and-such; ah well, we'll then go and do other things for him.

Our systems have been very poor. What we're hoping to do is connect them up and have a complete list of them and know where our veterans are. Now, a veteran could have passed away and their funeral been treated as a civilian one, and we wouldn't know the veteran has gone because we're not connected to the information databases. We don't know. Someone could have gone overseas. We don't know that either. But what we're hoping to do is to get much better information.

One of the keys to this is the veterans card that we have produced now in New Zealand, a little card with a red poppy on it—it's unmistakable. At the moment, it doesn't attract a lot of value in itself, but it eventually will. It's similar to a card we're giving to our superannuitants over the age of 65. Theirs has a lot on it. Anyway, it gives them access to some services. It will grow, because they have the superannuitants' card.

The veterans card is highly sought after, because there are some firms that will give discounts to superannuitants. People turn up with a veterans card, pull it out and ask, "Do you give discounts to veterans?" The person will see the poppy on it, and even though the firm probably doesn't give discounts, for a veteran, they'll say, "Okay, mate, we do." So the veterans are finding these cards highly desirable, because even where there's no official discount rate, the firms are giving them one.

It reflects a change in values in New Zealand, where veterans are being accorded more respect today than they were 20 years ago—and I would say more respect in various sorts of ways, for a range of reasons.

One is that in New Zealand we were taught at school about the kings and queens of England. I never found any use for that piece of information in my life here, but anyway, I know a lot about it. But I was taught almost nothing about New Zealand history. What we're doing in schools now is we're teaching New Zealand children about New Zealand history—and of course you can't teach New Zealand history without talking about Gallipoli, about the Western Front, about World War II, about Korea and Vietnam, and so on, and who the veterans are. And schools are teaching people about ANZAC Day, which is our day of commemoration, and about what the poppy

means. So the kids are seeing in their parents and their grandparents values they never saw before, and there's more respect. So there's a change in dynamic. There are other things, too, which I am sure you are well aware of.

So veterans in New Zealand are being accorded higher status and more respect and more regard. This is going to have a follow-on effect, in my view, for generations. I am sure the same is happening in Canada, as it is in other countries. I think this is all for the good. Instead of it being just something a person did—which is what the generation from World War II said, "Oh, I just did my job and that was the end of it, so don't give me anything else"—people are now saying, "No, you're a veteran; you are a special person."

I think we're going to have changes as a consequence of that. I don't know where this is going to go, but it is going to go somewhere really good.

Mr. Roger Valley: You've taught us something here today, so thanks for that.

The Chair: I'd just like to add that I know the Prime Minister has made comments that he sees larger and larger people coming out for veterans day ceremonies across the country from year to year, so it's good to see.

Now over to the Conservative Party and Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Our chairman meant larger numbers of people, not larger people, are coming out to the events.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. David Sweet: There might be a number of larger people in the larger numbers!

Thank you very much, Minister, for coming, and thank you for your good sense of humour.

I want to ask you, do you have troops on the ground right now in Afghanistan or Iraq?

•(1710)

Hon. Rick Barker: We have troops on the ground in Afghanistan. We don't have any in Iraq. We sent a group of engineers there for a period of time under a UN mandate. We have troops on active duty in East Timor. We have troops in the Solomon Islands. And I think there are about another ten or a dozen other places where we are, with UN-led operations.

Mr. David Sweet: My question then would be, would those in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, and Afghanistan be considered veterans after their service?

Hon. Rick Barker: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: Good. I just wanted to clarify that I had the right definition.

Do you have a good working relationship with our Veterans Affairs? Has it been ongoing for some time now?

Hon. Rick Barker: Yes, we do. I am very gratified, having been to two ministerial summits, by how good they are. I have found them to be very worthwhile.

We turn up as a group to discuss issues that are tough to discuss with anybody else. I think Veterans' Affairs is quite a unique portfolio for a variety of reasons. I find it really refreshing to talk to my counterparts in other countries, because we face similar issues and there's a genuine desire to learn from each other and try to make improvements. I think they've been very constructive meetings.

The second thing is there's a huge amount of history here among the various groups. I find at the officials level and all the way down there is cooperation, support, and respect for each other of the highest level. I can't find any fault with it.

I think we can improve on it. Having been to the United States as part of the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs, we're inviting the next group to come to New Zealand, and I think we'll go around the various countries. In doing so we'll rebuild connections that haven't been there for a long time. It's been a long time, if ever, since a Minister of Veterans Affairs from Canada has been in New Zealand for ANZAC Day. The symbolism of that will be very powerful and will resonate throughout our community.

Mr. David Sweet: Very good. I'm certain that my colleague, who was concerned about lamb chops, will be happy to know that our minister will get some when he's there.

Finally, every commemoration or ceremony I've been to in Canada always ends with "at the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them". I think that's really the heartfelt feeling of all veterans. They were all prepared to lay down their lives for their friends and for their countrymen and women. The only thing they want is to make sure they're remembered.

I want to ask if you could briefly go through some of the things you do. I'm certain you fund a number of things on ANZAC Day, but what do you do to commemorate and memorialize the service of your veterans?

Hon. Rick Barker: The most significant thing we did in recent years was bring an unknown warrior back from the Western Front. We now have a tomb of the unknown warrior. It was something that people had raised before and discussed, but it never happened. We did it, and in doing so we made one mistake. The unknown warrior was flown into Wellington and lay in state here at the Parliament Buildings for two days. The crowds that came to see the unknown warrior's casket were such that they had to leave the building open all night. It was supposed to close at 8 o'clock at night, but the numbers came in. The numbers that turned out on the day for the casket to be carried from Parliament to the tomb of the unknown warrior were unbelievable.

The mistake we made was that we should have taken the casket to other centres throughout New Zealand so that others had the opportunity to pay their respects. The outpouring of grief and emotion was unanticipated. I think there was only one person who said we would get this reaction, but no one expected it. So that's the major event we did in recent times.

We fund the memorial day—we call it ANZAC Day and it's in April. It starts off at dawn, and we leave it to the local organizations to do that. They do a superb job.

The numbers attending ANZAC Day commemorations have grown and grown. I come from a small town of 50,000, and we

expect 4,000 or 5,000 people to be there at 6 o'clock in the freezing cold, which is very impressive. The kids turn up with medals from their grandfathers and great-grandfathers.

I'm getting a bit emotional about this.

Fiona, carry on.

● (1715)

Ms. Fiona Macrae As well as ANZAC Day and supporting that outpouring in the community, the minister also has a discretionary fund whereby he's able to assist veterans to go back to areas where they fought, so they can go back and visit the battlefields they fought in. It's kind of a closure for them to go back and see where they were, how it is changed. Last year there were about 120 who went back to Malaya, who had fought with the British forces in Malaya, and they toured around Malaya and went to all the places they had served in, saw all those things, and saw how they contributed to that community. We sent a number of Korean veterans back to Korea, and they feel good in themselves that they contributed to modern-day Korea. They can see how their service benefited another country as well as what they have done for New Zealand. So that is a very significant way in which we can acknowledge their service, provide an acknowledgement and support for them.

The minister went and joined with the guys who went to Malaya. They had a great time. They showed him where they'd been and were rewarded by the Malayan people for what they had done. That, as well as what we do in New Zealand to commemorate people, to commemorate veterans for their service, is an important step as well. Now they can go back and see what they have contributed.

Hon. Rick Barker: We pay the basic airfare. We pay nothing else. We just pay the basic airfare. We've sent 140 to Malaya, and it was a trip the group organized to get themselves there for Hari Merdeka, which is the day of recognition of independence. It was the 50th anniversary of Merdeka. There was a huge, long parade, and the Malays didn't realize they had quite a large group of New Zealand vets there, but when they did, they made space on the parade for them and they walked. Here were these old men with walking sticks and so on, all vets, and the crowd gave them an amazing ovation. The paper reported the loudest applause was for the vets. Everywhere they went they were well looked after. One vet told me it was so good he couldn't get his money belt around his waist any more. It took a week. He said he had to carry it over his shoulder. They sort of heaped hospitality on them. It was fantastic. They came back and told their friends what they had done.

Fiona is quite right that it is a really emotional journey for them, and it sends a powerful message out through the rest of the community.

So we give them each one return airfare if that's what they want to do. It has to be to a commemoration or a memorial trip. If we were going to Korea, there is a particular function, a particular battlefield that commemorates the start of our engagement in Korea. Nearly every year there is a group of 20 to 30 Korean vets who go back.

I think this is one of the best things we have ever done. Not many other people do it that I'm aware of, but it's really well worthwhile. I can't tell you just how much value we get out of it for the veterans, and it is very symbolic and powerful for them.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. That's a great story.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Perron, from the Bloc Québécois, you have five minutes.

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: Mr. Chair, I will be brief, because we have a vote at about 5:30 p.m. and I want to give the others a chance to ask a question.

Do you have a lot of veterans' organizations, like we do in Canada? We have veterans from Korea, from the first Gulf War, from peacekeeping operations, and so on. We must have fifty or so. In my opinion, they are fragmented, whereas they should be coming together to gain strength in numbers and get all the assistance they can.

Could you tell us if you have the same situation?

[*English*]

Hon. Rick Barker: We don't have a problem as such. The Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association is recognized by all as the umbrella organization, the pre-eminent organization representing veterans. It is the largest by far. There are other groups, and I and the RSA president meet with the other groups such as the Malayan vets, the Korean vets, who are members of the RSA, and the Vietnam vets. They all turn up, and we have—I've forgotten what the name of the meeting is. It's the affiliates forum. We do this to make sure we keep everybody together on the one page because what we don't want is to have multiple voices speaking on behalf of veterans. We want to have a single, clear voice. I have made it clear to veterans that that is in their best interest, and they accept that. They recognize the leadership of the RSA, so by working with them collectively, we are keeping them together as a group for their best interests, for my best interests, for everybody's best interests.

I don't want to see anything done to try to make one group feel they could get a special deal over here as opposed to someone over there. If we do that, we'll stop the groups and we'll have nothing but trouble from there on.

I reinforce the message with the veterans, which they have done themselves, to speak with a single voice. It's the most powerful voice they can have.

• (1720)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles-A. Perron: When people leave the regular army and return to civilian life, does your Ministry of National Defence provide all the information on programs that veterans can receive, or do they just have to fend for themselves? That was the case here in Canada, but it seems to be getting better. There is supposed to be a kind of association, a way in which Veterans Affairs and National Defence work together. How is your system better? What in your system do you feel works well?

[*English*]

Hon. Rick Barker: It's been decided that in the decades prior to this, people weren't given the best information they could have been. The whole thrust of our reorganization is to improve the quality of information people are given and to have a seamless transition for

people from being service personnel to being a veteran or going into civilian life.

Prior to the person's leaving, there are clear sessions put out where all the transitional issues are handled, and we're doing our very best to make sure we do it to the highest degree we can. Wherever we find that we have difficulties, we're overcoming them. It's a process of constant and incremental improvement. Whatever we can do better, we will do better.

I'm sorry, I'm going to have to go. I have to be interrogated by a parliamentary committee on estimates of moneys that I'm responsible for. So you know what sport is about to be afoot.

The Chair: It's not a problem. We thank you very much for your time, sir. If you were here we would invite you for a beer. You've given us some great ideas.

Thank you very much.

Hon. Rick Barker: I'll just say in closing that I'll have a rain check on the beer. I'll come and collect it as soon as I can.

Thank you.

The Chair: Wonderful.

Committee members, just before we head off to the vote, there are a couple of things I want to address with you.

One is that we could go ahead and hold a meeting on Thursday; however, there is some debate and rumour about whether we'll be gone as of question period on Wednesday or whether it will be question period on Thursday, or what have you. Also, there is no other committee scheduled for Thursday afternoon. So I've told the clerk not to bother booking the French for Thursday afternoon. We'll resume that portion of the study in the fall—unless I have massive overwhelming—

• (1725)

Mr. Roger Valley: I think we should stay for another week.

The Chair: Well, there you go. Bless your heart.

I also wanted to let people know that some of us had the chance to visit the Beechwood Cemetery. I went there again today and got some things.

I thought this was interesting. If you can make this out, it is an example of an unmarked grave. There are about 60 of them in that cemetery, and there are about 33 other cemeteries across the country. This is an example of a plaque that is on the ground. A lot of these are for spouses. This one happens to be for a serving member. There was some debate when we were at the cemetery on whether we could see fit to make sure that every single one of those unmarked graves at least has one of these plaques, which we figure would be less than \$1,000, maybe as little as \$500. We'll see.

The other example here is one that was done through the Last Post Fund, through Veterans Affairs. As you can see, they all have the cross on them.

This other one is an example of something the families would finance themselves, above and beyond what the Last Post Fund makes available.

So I think we'll probably want to give some consideration to that idea at some point.

Mr. Roger Valley: I think you need a better camera.

The Chair: I was using my phone, which I had available.

Mr. Shipley.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Could I just follow up on that a little bit, Mr. Chairman?

Although I wasn't able to be at the tour on Thursday, I'm just wondering if it would be of interest to the committee to actually ask the ministry to help provide us with the number. We have unmarked and we have unknown. I'm wondering if they could help provide us with the number of those unknowns and the ones that are unmarked but where they know the person who is there. With the cemeteries we have for veterans, it would help to give us the details in terms of the background of the number of cemeteries, in fact, that Veterans Affairs has the number of unknown and unmarked graves and sites that there are, just to give us a bit of a handle on where that's at in total.

And then, depending on the results of that, I think maybe I would like to see the committee have some discussion about where we might go to help change that.

The Chair: I just want to provide context. In this one here, I made sure the person buried there is known, but it is unmarked.

Mr. Valley.

Mr. Roger Valley: I'm not sure Mr. Shipley is talking about just one set of cemeteries. We have cemeteries right across the country where we have known soldiers buried and have no marker of any kind on them at all. They're everywhere.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I'm just talking about veterans right now, and I think it would be good to have the information. Then it might generate some discussion about where we might want to take it from there. Defence has its own issue with soldiers, but I think for veterans—

Mr. Roger Valley: The issue is broader than just that cemetery.

Mr. Bev Shipley: No, no. I meant across Canada, the number of cemeteries.

The Chair: Recognize that I'm not just discussing this in terms of Beechwood. It just so happens that was where the pictures are.

Mr. Bev Shipley: I appreciate the chair showing us that we have that documentation, but I meant across Canada, not just the one.

The Chair: Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: I think the committee has the whole spirit of this. But one of the issues I'd like to add my voice to is that I can't think of anything—I just mentioned to the minister about remembrance—so contrary to the notion of remembrance than having someone who actually served and we don't know who's there. I know there are budgets and everything, but I think I'd like us to eventually make a recommendation on it.

An hon. member: Lest we forget.

The Chair: I'll just let you know that it was an interesting experience. I was given the master list of all the graves, and as I went around, I saw that many of them of course were marked and I knew who the individual was—the names were on the master list. But there were spots where there was no marker, and that's of course what I took a picture of. So we know who's there, but it's not marked.

All right. At that, I will say the meeting is adjourned....

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Are you going to look at some paintings for us for the unofficial veterans room?

The Chair: Sure. I think that's a grand idea.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: I'd like to report something. Are we on record now?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Brent St. Denis: Can I say this off the record?

The Chair: Why don't I just adjourn?

The meeting is adjourned for the summer.

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