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Chair

Mr. David Sweet

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC)): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

We have Colonel Jean-Michel Verney with us today, but I want to go over a couple of things before the colonel gives his testimony and we get into questioning.

We have some committee business to do, and so we will suspend questioning at 5:10 p.m.

For those who are new to our committee today, you'll find this committee tends to be more conciliatory and less constrained than other committees.

I would like to remind members that the time limit is on the questioner, the member of Parliament, and not on the witness. So when we are in the different rounds, the minutes assigned will be consumed by those questions and, of course, the witness simultaneously. Once the time has expired, the witness can continue to answer, but we'll then move on to the next member and party.

Madam O'Neill-Gordon.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): I know I'm running late, but I had another meeting.

I'm just wondering if the briefing notes could be given to us sooner, because I didn't have a chance to read them since we got them this morning; I just didn't have much of a chance. I skimmed over them, but that's about it. This is important information that we're getting, and I'm a new kid on the block as well, and I need a little more time. I really think most people would need some more time to read the notes, and so I'm just asking if this would be possible further on.

The Chair: I'll ask the researcher.

Mr. Michel Rossignol (Committee Researcher): It depends on when the meeting is confirmed. Sometimes there's only short notice before it's confirmed, and that explains in part why the briefing notes are sometimes given the day of the meeting.

The Chair: The research staff has said they'll do their best to do that.

Particularly with a study like this that has been adopted from the previous Parliament and that we are continuing with, I would obviously take any input from members to suspend the meeting and to move it to the next day if the members feel they can't get to the meeting prepared.

The researcher has told me that the summary of the testimony from the previous Parliament, which we need for our comparative study, should be available to us later this week, hopefully by Wednesday. But if not, it should be available by the end of the week. So by then we'll have a lot more detail for those of you here today who did not participate in that Parliament. Of course, Monsieur Gaudet has a distinct advantage because he was here for the 39th Parliament and was part of that study.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Is there anything urgent before we get to the witness, ladies and gentlemen?

Then we're grateful to have Colonel Jean-Michel Verney with us, the defence attaché from the embassy of France.

Colonel, we'll allow you to give some opening remarks and then we'll rotate between the different parties for their questions for you. Then you'll have an opportunity to answer those at your behest.

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney (Defence Attaché, Embassy of France): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies and gentlemen members of the committee, I am at once very pleased to appear before you this afternoon and somewhat moved because this is the first time that I get to speak before such a distinguished assembly.

I would like to give you a brief overview of my career path. I was trained as a fighter pilot. Having participated in a number of theatres of operations, I myself am a veteran. I should know everything about veterans' affairs, but I do not pretend to have such knowledge. I would like to apologize for any shortcomings I might have. I wanted to appear before you this afternoon because I also wanted to express my solidarity with and admiration for the Canadian troops engaged in the theatres of operations. It is in the form of a tribute to your injured and fallen, especially in the Afghan theatre, that I am pleased to try and help you in your deliberations. I do so quite humbly, because I do not possess all the required expertise. However, I can provide you with a number of pieces of information.

If I may, I will give you a very brief overview of the organization of veterans affairs in France. I will provide you with some statistics. Following that, I will touch on the budgetary aspect. Lastly, with your permission, I will give you a very brief account of the benefits offered to our veterans. I will also talk to you about the infrastructure and institutions we have in France to welcome them.

First of all, allow me to explain or, at least, remind you of the structure of the Defence Department. In France, the Minister of Defence delegates the responsibility of veterans to a Secretary of State for Defence. This structure was set up in 1999. Prior to that, our structure was the same as here in Canada. Today, veterans fall under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Defence through a delegated authority.

I would like to point out that, in addition to the delegate responsible for veterans, the Minister of Defence has three principal subordinates. The first is the Army Chief of Staff, the counterpart of Canada's Chief of the Defence staff. The second subordinate is the Delegate General for Armament. This person is responsible for all military equipment and procurement programs; his duties are similar to those of Canada's Minister of Public Works and the Assistant Deputy Minister for Materiel. The third subordinate is the Secretary General, Administration. As his title indicates, he is responsible for the administration of the Department of Defence and has duties similar to those of Canada's Deputy Minister of Defence.

I have given you this brief outline of the organization to show that the Secretary of State for Defence, the Minister of State delegated by the Minister, relies on the Secretary General, Administration, for all things administrative. I will also explain how the Secretary General, Administration, is responsible for managing the veterans' affairs program.

I would like to give you a few statistics to show you the scope of our activities. There are some 3.6 million veterans in France. In 2008, there were approximately 361,000 former personnel who were pensioners.

The resources available to the Department of Defence in order to conduct its missions are voted on annually by way of financial pieces of legislation. Generally speaking, these are in conformity with what we in France call a military action plan act, which covers a five-year period. The last plan ran from 2003 to 2008, and the next one will be in effect from 2009 to 2014.

• (1535)

I would also like to indicate that we have had an organic act concerning our financial legislation since 2006. Allow me to explain. There is a principle by which resources are allocated by mission and program, taking into account objectives and performance indicators. This is simply a best practice that is commonly used by all governments. It is a way to measure the performance of the state's actions.

Allow me to delve deeper into the department. The Minister of Defence is given four missions. The first being essentially its defence mission, i.e., preparing its personnel and equipment. The second, suffice it to say, is a security mission. The third deals with research and higher education, and the fourth is an interdepartmental mission, which includes the veterans affairs, heritage and public outreach components. It is therefore a full-fledged mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This last mission contains two programs. The first has to do with the relationship between the army and the French people. The main goal is to promote the spirit of defence and create outreach opportunities throughout the year, including what we call the

Journée d'appel de la préparation à la défense (defence readiness day). This is a day that is organized for teenagers and young adults, allowing them to spend a day on various defence sites and to share with them a number of messages concerning citizenship, and the need to ensure defence and security. This is what we call a JAPD for short, and it allows some 780,000 young people to participate each year. That is the national outreach component, which represents some 7% of the Veterans Affairs budget. The remaining 93% of the budget, as you have gathered, is allocated to the second program, which contains recognition and redress measures for our veterans.

Here again, allow me to give you a few statistics. The recognition and redress program amounts to 93% of the Veterans Affairs budget, or exactly 7.1% of the total Defence budget. Therefore, out of the total Defence budget, 7.1% are allocated to redress and recognition measures, and particularly our veterans' pensions.

Allow me to place a few things into perspective. The French Defence budget includes 21% for military equipment and 44% for personnel readiness and wages. That is to compare those 7% with the costs associated with the activities of our forces and their equipment.

Allow me to talk to you more about the recognition and redress program, which is, as I indicated, under the responsibility of the Secretary General, Administration, and not of the Minister of State for Veterans Affairs. That is why I found it useful, in my introduction, to give you an outline of the Defense Department's structure.

What is the purpose of the program? It is to provide recipients with all the redress or recognition benefits they are entitled to. They are allocated according to what we call the Military Disability Pension and War Victims Code. This code is basically the current regime for veterans' who are entitled to a military disability pension.

The recognition and redress program is a four-pronged action plan. First, there is the administration of life annuities. Simply put, this is the payment of our veterans military disability and retirement pensions. The second action—and this might more particularly be the subject of your questions—is the management of military pension rights. I can give you a few examples. Veterans have the right to free medical care, the right to necessary equipment and the right to draw social security. These are rights concerning taxation, transport, retirement homes as well as access to a number of institutions made available to veterans.

• (1540)

In particular, I would like to speak about the Institution Nationale des Invalides [national institution for the disabled] and the Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre [the national veterans and war victims board]. But I will return to that point in a few moments, if you don't mind.

The third component of the program is the solidarity component. It includes the various benefits that we provide to veterans, in particular the veterans retirement allowance. We also offer access to a number of group insurance retirement plans and various forms of administrative assistance.

The fourth component of the program covers maintenance of the commemorative sites. Most of these sites are perpetual graveyards for various categories of disabled veterans or veterans who had received a war pension.

The fifth component is just the actual administration of the first four components that I have told you about.

If you don't mind, I would like to give you a few more figures.

On average, France provides 9,154 euros in funding per pensioner per year, for a total of 361,000 pensioners in our country. Of course, the figures I am giving you are for 2008; I do not have figures for 2009.

Later we will be able to go back to the specific entitlements of veterans and the various benefits paid. I can provide you with a list of the various benefits. After these introductory remarks, I will be entirely at your disposal to answer your questions.

First and foremost, I would like to tell you about two specific institutions that provide support to French veterans. The first institution is called the Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre. This board, which is specifically French, was established in 1916. It is a government administrative agency, national in scope, that comes under the umbrella of the veterans affairs ministry. The mandate of the National Veterans and War Victims Board is to serve the 3.6 million veterans in France. The primary mandate of the agency is to provide social and administrative assistance. The board has offices in all the departments of France. It also runs retirement homes for veterans and occupational training schools for disabled people who need to retrain because they cannot resume the job that they had before they became disabled.

The second institution is the Institution Nationale des Invalides, whose mandate is to assist disabled people and provide hospital care. One notable feature of the institution is a medical and surgical centre that takes part in various studies and research on equipment and devices for the disabled. For more than three centuries, this institution has benefited from the protection of the head of state.

At the current time, in 2009, France is consolidating these various entitlements, because we now have more and more veterans. We must enhance these entitlements, particularly in financial terms. For example, we must enhance the value of military pensions. In the past few years, the issue of what we call "décrystallisation" has been a major topic of discussion in France. I doubt that this term can be translated.

"Décrystallisation" means that henceforth, benefits paid to veterans must be the same for all those who fought for France, in particular for those people who are citizens of states that once were held or administered by France. In other words, a military pensioner in Morocco or Algeria must collect the same pension as his French comrade in arms, if he fought alongside French soldiers at one time in the past.

● (1545)

This is a major issue that has been dealt with in recent years, and has now been solved. These pensioners are now entitled to the same benefits, the same amounts, as those paid to their French counterparts.

Our program is also working to improve the situation of retired combatants, group annuities and compensation for the orphans whose parents were the victims of antisemitic persecution or barbaric acts that occurred during the Second World War. So that is the current state of affairs as of late 2008. So as you can see, the veterans affairs ministry is mostly consolidating and improving entitlements, not opening up new areas for investigation.

I am not quite sure how much time you had given me for my presentation. I can briefly explain the specifics of the pension and provide you more details about the benefits that we provide to veterans. I'm in your hands for that kind of question.

Well, there you have it Mr. Chairman. I'm finished.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Colonel Verney.

[English]

The first questioner will be MP Dryden.

[Translation]

Hon. Ken Dryden (York Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Colonel Verney.

I am wondering if you could give us some context. You have given us some details, but I would like to hear from you how the general population views this system. What are the major criticisms of this system from veterans and from the general population?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Thank you, sir.

As I described the administrative structures to you, for the most part, we are working at two levels. The first concern, of course, is the value of the pensions paid to our veterans and the coverage for illness. I believe that this is the major concern. Then we have all the various benefits provided to veterans, such as access to group retirement plans, payments to retired combatants and tax breaks. Probably efforts could be made in that regard.

Our second area of concern is recognition of certain theatres of operations and certain campaigns. As you know, history is not always very simple. At certain points in history, it is not an easy task to determine the exact status and the exact entitlements of people who took part in these operations. One example would be service in Northern Africa or far more difficult issues such as service during nuclear trials. According to some stakeholders, and according to people who took part in various operations, the state may not be going far enough in terms of recognizing service at certain points in history or during certain foreign operations or during certain times of crisis.

For example, we do recognize the theatres of operations of some battles in North Africa, but our methods of calculating entitlements do not necessarily work in the best interests of those who took part in the events. Allow me to explain. When you are in a theatre of operations, you are subject to what we call the principle of the single campaign. In other words, when your retirement entitlements are calculated, if you spent 90 days in the theatre of operations, you double these 90 days and you receive a total of 180 days. This principle is not recognized in certain theatres of operations, and veterans are fighting these mechanisms for determining entitlements.

To sum up, I would say that improvements will not be attained by looking for new mechanisms, but rather, by calling for larger pensions and better tax breaks. In the final analysis, we must determine how to make things easier for veterans from a financial point of view when they find themselves in difficulty. And finally, we want all theatres of operations to be recognized.

Once again, I was reading the document from Veterans Affairs about activities in 2008 and the record for that year. If the truth be told, it really is all about consolidating entitlements rather than looking for new possibilities.

• (1555)

[English]

The Chair: Two minutes, Mr. Dryden.

[Translation]

Hon. Ken Dryden: I would like to ask you another question in the same vein.

It would appear that in some countries, the system for veterans' affairs has a bad reputation, almost scandalous. There is a major difference between what actually exists and what seems to be fair. In France, is the system pretty fair or does it require many changes? Are conditions almost scandalous?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Mr. Dryden, that is not a delicate issue in France, the government is not having trouble with that issue, nor does it have to improve outcomes. I would say that there is a certain consensus on veterans' affairs, and there have not been pressing demands from veterans. So I am not able to compare our system to those in other countries, and I probably do not have the expertise to do so either.

I should say right from the outset that in France, we have a formula for social security that is not just for military staff. It is a form of health insurance for all Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, and I acknowledge that this basic coverage is very expensive, and the deficits are very large—that is the difficult part of the issue—but on the other hand, our social security system is a good foundation for working together and building a system of pension payments, benefits and other entitlements for our veterans. So our system starts with a foundation this is called the social security, and once again, there may be criticism, but the system is there for all Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. So I do not think that people feel that the government is doing a poor job of taking care of veterans.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Colonel.

Monsieur Gaudet is next.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet (Montcalm, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Colonel Verney.

I do have a small question. In France, do you have a charter of veterans' rights?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: A charter of veterans' rights?

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Yes.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I could not tell you.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Do you have an ombudsman for veterans?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: An ombudsman?

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): An advocate.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: A kind of judge who defends the interests of veterans.

• (1600)

Mr. Louis Plamondon: He is appointed by the state.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: He is appointed by the state.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: So you do not have an ombudsman?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No, I am sorry, not to my knowledge.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Fine.

If my memory serves me well, earlier you said that you had 3.6 million veterans.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Of these 3.6 million veterans, 361,000 are collecting a pension.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Does that mean that the 3 million who are not collecting a pension are not ill? I am thinking about our veterans here who suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. You do not have that problem in France?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No. Well, it is true that only 300,000 veterans are collecting a disability pension. The remaining veterans are those people who belonged—the rule stipulates 90 days—to a combat unit in wartime or during foreign operations. If they meet these criteria, they are entitled to be recognized as veterans. They are entitled to wear a medal that is called the combatants' cross and at age 65, they receive a retired combatants' pension. This pension is tax free. Most of the pensions are for disabled veterans, but that does not mean that government assistance stops with these 360,000 veterans. There are a number of other benefits—I can go into the details if you wish—that are for both veterans receiving pensions and for veterans who may have suffered a less serious wound, at a recognized minimum rate, or may suffer from a lesser illness, again at a certain rate, which I can also describe to you. So at one time or another, all of these 3.6 million veterans will be collecting something from the state, either a pension or some other kind of retirement allowance.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Who are these veterans? Are they veterans of the First World War, the Second World War and the Korean War, or are there others?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: There are others. Once you have served in a combat unit for 90 days in wartime or in foreign operations, you are a veteran. I got my veteran's card for my first tour which was during the first Gulf war, when I spent about 100 days in the theatre of operations. Then you may go on to a second, third or fourth tour, but that does not change your status at all. You become a veteran on the basis of that first tour.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: According to our briefing notes, you have 665 beds. Are all of them for veterans, or are they for veterans that the state has assumed responsibility for, while other veterans go to ordinary retirement homes?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: The 665 beds are allocated to veterans who are collecting a pension first. Then, we expand the circle. In other words, there are agreements between retirement homes that report directly to the Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre. There are eight such retirement homes in all of France. Furthermore, there are agreements with other retirement homes where these veterans can live. However, the retirement homes that come under the national board are free. Once people go into private retirement homes, even if there is an agreement, financial resources are necessary to access the home.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I have one last question, colonel Verney. You stated that on average, people receive a retirement allowance of 9,154 euros. Is that for veterans age 65 and over?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No, it's for all the pensioners. Once a person comes back from a theatre...

Mr. Roger Gaudet: One leg...

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Exactly, be it one leg, one wound or one illness. For your information, about 350 soldiers in the land forces are wounded each year. Of these 350, about forty will be disabled for life. So a person can receive this pension if he has served in a theatre of operations.

• (1605)

Mr. Louis Plamondon: That is the amount they receive per year?

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Yes, they receive 9,154 euros per year.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: It is the equivalent of \$18,000.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: More like \$13,000.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes, and that is an average. I do not know whether it would be useful to go into the specific details of how a pension is calculated. The entitlement can range from 10 % to beyond 100 %. It depends on the disability and the person's rank.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Thank you, Colonel Verney. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You still have one minute, sir.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I have one minute left. Well, away you go.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: That means that if someone in your country joins the army at the age 20, spends 25 years in the army and leaves at age 45, unless he leaves because of an injury, he will not immediately collect a veteran's pension. He only will get a pension at age 65.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: The pension is not the same thing as the retirement allowance.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: In other words, a retirement allowance...

Col Jean-Michel Verney: You get a pension because you sustained an injury related to a theatre of operations.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: The person joins the army at age 20. If after 25 years of service, the person leaves the army, not because of an injury, he or she will not get anything before the age of 65.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: We are talking about a retirement allowance.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Yes. He or she will get a retirement allowance at age 65.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: That's not the retirement allowance for a veteran, I am talking about the retirement allowance from the public service.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: All right. So an individual between the ages of 45 and 65, who leaves the army after 25 years of service, but who is uninjured and in good health, will receive nothing from the state.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: This individual will receive nothing.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: This person will pursue a second career. The pension is reserved for the injured.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: All right.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: However, as I alluded to earlier, an individual may have served for 90 days. This individual may be entitled to a veteran's pension once he or she reaches the age of 65, which would be in addition to the public service pension or the pension that any individual would have accumulated throughout his or her career.

Mr. Louis Plamondon: This is a major difference from the way things work in Canada. Here the person receives the pension immediately once he or she leaves the army, at age 42, 44 or 45. In France, this happens at 65.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci, monsieur Plamondon.*

Mr. Stoffer, five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sir, thank you very much for coming to our committee today.

I want to ask you this. In France, what is the definition of a veteran? For example, if I signed up with the French army tomorrow and I did my training and in my third month I was hit by something and became permanently injured, would I be considered a veteran even though I hadn't served 90 days in theatre, as you had indicated before? Or if I served 25 years but never left the country of France—say I had more national service within the military but remained in France and never crossed the border—would I be considered a veteran then?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: A soldier is a veteran if he's entitled to a pension because he's been injured. So he would necessarily be a veteran.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'm not worried about pension benefits. It's the definition of veteran.

You said you have 3.6 million veterans in France, and 361,000 are receiving a pension. What is the definition of veteran in France? You said earlier that if you served 90 days in theatre somewhere else, then you'd be a veteran. For example, you served in the first Gulf War—I believe it was the first one. You served 90 days, so you will be considered a veteran when you leave the service. But if you hadn't served overseas, if you'd stayed within France, or if you had become injured in your training as a new recruit, for example, would you be considered a veteran then?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes. The title of veteran broadly covers military personnel who have simply served more than 90 days beyond our borders, without necessarily having served in a combat unit, either during a time of war or crisis. As soon as these individuals have served the state for more than 90 days, they obtain what we refer to as a *titre de reconnaissance de la nation*, or a certificate of gratitude from the nation. These people include pensioners, veterans, those who are entitled to this *titre de la reconnaissance de la nation*. All of these people together constitute our veterans.

For example, a young man who has accumulated 25 years of service and who has spent 90 days participating in an operation outside the country, without necessarily being in a combat unit, will be given the *titre de reconnaissance de la nation* and will be entitled to veterans' benefits.

However, if this same person remained in France and never participated in an operation outside the country, he would not be considered a veteran. That means that somebody working in a support role—I no longer know whether support is still far removed from the combat units; everything is so closely interlinked these days—he would have had to have spent 90 days participating in an operation outside the country in order to become a veteran.

•(1610)

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: *Merci, monsieur.*

I noticed in your presentation that you never brought up the words “family” or “spouse” or “children”. If you were to serve your country and pay the ultimate sacrifice for your country, what benefit would fall upon, say, your wife and your children?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Some provisions are available. These are what we call successor pensions. The pension is to go to the spouse, children or dependents, as soon as the individual receiving this pension dies. There are some reconversion principles that I could describe for you, should you so wish. Do you want me to go into the...

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Is it a lump sum payment that the family would get, or is it a monthly pension for the rest of the spouse's life?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: It would be for the rest of the surviving spouse's life. There are, however, various scenarios. Depending on the pensioner's situation, the reconversion could be in full or on a

sliding scale. The spouse will not necessarily receive 100% of the pension amount.

[English]

The Chair: The time is up, Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: *Merci.*

The Chair: Mr. Kerr, for seven minutes.

Mr. Greg Kerr (West Nova, CPC): Thank you very much, Colonel, for joining us today.

In your presentation you were talking in terms of the services provided by your defence department or minister of state for defence, and I notice that one of the examples is that non-military disabled—in other words, civilian disabled—are able to be retrained at those facilities. Do you have many examples where civilian and military facilities provide that kind of programming—in other words, where both civilians and veterans can get the services provided?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Are you referring to civilian Defence staff?

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes, it's on the second page we have here: “Training is also provided to disabled persons who are not veterans.” I assume that means to the civilian population, the non-military population?

Perhaps I'll just ask it in a general way, if I could. Are there programs provided both to your civilian population and to your veteran military population at the same time?

•(1615)

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I did not have this document, so I am unable to... I did not work on this document, so I do not know exactly...

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay, let's—

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: ... which mechanism you were referring to. I apologize for that.

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Let's leave it as a general question, if we can. Are there programs through which you provide services both to military veterans and to non-military people? Are there examples of that taking place?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No. I cannot provide you with any examples.

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay, I'll get off that line of questioning. I'll have to check into that later, then, if you don't mind.

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I apologize.

[English]

The Chair: We're just about out of time. It might be fairer to Colonel Verney to say that the member was quoting from a briefing document we have, which says the ONAC is responsible for a network of nine professional retraining schools throughout France that help disabled veterans obtain training in various trades so they can make a successful transition from military service to civilian life. Then it goes on to say that non-service people are also incorporated in that.

Are you familiar with that, Colonel?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Mr. Chairman, I did understand the question. The Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre does provide assistance to military personnel. Does it also provide assistance to civilians? I am no expert in this area and I am sorry about that. My apologies.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Are you finished with the questions?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Yes, that's fine, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke, you can take the rest of the time. You have another five minutes.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Mississippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for coming today.

I have a question. I was with the RCMP or Gendarmerie royale du Canada for 18 years. In Canada if you serve in the RCMP abroad or in our country—it doesn't really matter where—you're deemed to be a veteran. If members of your national police force serve at home or abroad, are they entitled to the same benefits as the veterans who serve overseas?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Are you talking about the police force or the military?

[English]

Mr. Rob Clarke: Yes.

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: You're referring to the police.

Mr. Rob Clarke: I'm referring to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Quite. Police officers have the same status as members of the military, so they come under exactly the same system as the military. Even if, as of January 1, 2009, namely one and a half months ago, they are no longer under the purview of the Department of National Defence. They now come under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior, the Ministère de la sécurité intérieure et des libertés civiles, but do keep their military status. If a police officer were sent to an operating theatre, he would meet the criteria for a veteran and he would, as such, be entitled to the benefits and rights given to veterans.

[English]

Mr. Rob Clarke: I have no further questions.

The Chair: Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): If I might, I want to pick up on the question, I believe from Mr. Stoffer, about the dependants and the survivor benefits. Can you say what the average survivor benefit would be for a family, or dependants or survivors?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: These are benefits provided to the families. Surviving spouses, orphans or direct descendants are entitled to these pensions at the time of the soldier's death. This pension is also provided to the partners of a civil solidarity pact; this is not a marriage, but a union between two people that we refer to as a civil solidarity pact.

There are two survivor spouse pension rates. There is what we refer to as the reduced reversion rate. If the disabled soldier was receiving a pension at a rate of between 60% and 85%, this would be the disability rate. There is also a regular rate, if the soldier were pensioned at a rate in excess of 85%. The disability rate is taken into consideration in calculating the pension to be reverted to the spouse. Anything beyond 85% is considered a normal rate and is fully reversible.

Surviving spouses aged 50 and under who have few resources can also have the pension increased. We refer to this as an exceptional supplement, and every year the resource level of this individual is subject to a review. It is only the *trésorier-payeur général*, the paymaster general, who can decide whether or not to grant this increase.

We also have orphans' pensions, which are paid only if no survivor spouse pension is paid, namely, in the case where the spouse has deceased, remarried or divorced from the soldier and where there is a survivor or orphan resulting from a different relationship. This payment expires on the 21st birthday of the orphan, unless the latter is disabled or unable to look after him or herself, in which case the pension will be paid for the remainder of this individual's life.

In a nutshell, this is a brief description of the pensions and the payment of pensions to the spouse or children. If you would like, I can provide you with this document, which gives an itemized description of the provisions that I have just described to you.

● (1620)

[English]

The Chair: *Merci beaucoup, Colonel.*

Mr. Andrews, five minutes.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you.

Earlier you mentioned that your National Office of Veterans and Victims of War administers retirement homes for elderly veterans. I wonder if you could explain a little more about the retirement homes themselves. Is there a waiting list to get into these homes? What level of care do the veterans get in these retirement homes?—I assume it's different from a hospital setting. I believe you also cooperate with other public and private retirement homes across France. What levels of funding do you provide to private or other public institutions for beds and residences for veterans?

[*Translation*]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: The document was referring to eight retirement residences administered by the Office National des Anciens Combattants et des Victimes de Guerre, the ONAC. These retirement residences are run entirely by the state, and as such, they provide benefits equivalent to those provided by other retirement residences in France. Of course, the retirement residences are obliged, to some extent, to provide services.

There are 660 beds. Clearly, this number is not adequate to meet the needs of veterans. Some of the veterans must therefore go to the private sector. The medical services, reception and standards are not any better in the private sector, but sometimes this is the only way to find a bed.

An agreement between the retirement residences that are fully subsidized by the ONAC and private retirement residences enable us to find beds, but do not afford any significant cost benefits. This agreement simply makes it easier for us to get access to beds. I am not convinced that all of the retirement residences in France are able to accommodate the needs of all French citizens.

So the number of beds is limited both for veterans and society in general. The benefit of this agreement with the private retirement residences lies primarily in the fact that an individual can go to the top of the list and not have to go through the normal procedure. But there again, it is the veterans who have to pay for the cost of these private retirement residences. To my knowledge, no subsidy is offered if an individual is not able to obtain a bed out of the 660 reserved for pensioners.

• (1625)

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Andrews: Thank you.

Also, the National Office of Veterans and Victims of War is very active in advocating to young people about the sacrifices made by veterans. Could you explain some of that office's activities and how it encourages young people to remember those who have fought in war?

[*Translation*]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: These are media activities organized by the Office National des Anciens Combattants, in particular the Oeuvre Nationale du Bleu de France, which is quite special. There is a tradition of supporting victims of conflict, and the opportunity is taken to speak not only to young people, but also to the French public in general, about veterans' needs. Using television ads and poster campaigns, the initiative raises awareness about the problems faced by veterans and receives spontaneous donations from the

public. It helps young people understand veterans, whom it serves as a charity.

As for remembrance and young people's understanding of veterans, I described in my introduction the objectives of at least the programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I first spoke about recognition and compensation, and we have talked about this assistance. However, there is also the arms and nation program, which has a specific budget to create awareness among French youth of the needs of our veterans and the assistance available to them.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Colonel.

Thank you, Mr. Andrews.

Now for five minutes, Mr. Lobb.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Thank you very much, Colonel, for attending today.

In regards to training, I had a few questions about that. I wonder if you can give us a little more detail about the training and the different types of programs, in trades and so forth, that you provide to your veterans.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: These are veterans, wounded soldiers and those who cannot continue to provide service. The training is aimed first and foremost at helping them look for work in another department. So the skills could be used within the public service but also in the private sector. These retraining centres are for people who cannot work in their occupation because of some disability. It covers almost all public service positions, by department. Some positions are reserved for veterans. There is no limit in terms of access, as long as the skills are applicable. But when someone is retrained for work in the public sector, it is mainly in much more traditional occupations that require lower skills, without meaning to be pejorative. These areas include building construction, electricity and other work that helps communities.

Retraining focuses on helping people find work again either in their own department or in another department in areas reserved for those whose disability does not prevent them from carrying out their duties. So the retraining centre make this transition easier; these people upgrade their skills to be assigned to positions and generally do not have to compete for them.

[*English*]

Mr. Ben Lobb: Thank you.

For those who are disabled due to their service, for whom those jobs would not be appropriate due to, say, a paralysis or some other form of disability, would there be a time limit imposed on their training, or would they be trained to the full requirement to be able to perform, say, computer science or computer programming—those who would be disabled, unable to walk or perform physical duty?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: There is no timeframe for the retraining. From what I have read, the transition takes place within a set period. It is not as if someone had to learn completely new skills that had nothing to do with his or her training. I do not think that people can just pick any skill set they want, regardless of the cost and time involved. We unfortunately have to take into account cost effectiveness, and the retraining needs to happen within a reasonable time. We have to look at the cost and the time involved.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lobb. Your time is up.

Monsieur Gaudet.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Colonel, I want to come back to my question. Do people have to have been wounded physically in order to receive the disability pension?

For example, someone who goes to Afghanistan comes back with mental problems. In Canada, we call that post-traumatic stress syndrome. Do you have those kinds of cases in France?

• (1635)

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes. The wounds do not have to be physical in nature.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: No.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: We include psychological and pathological problems that are related to the operation that the person has come back from. That is clear.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Do they have the same rights as those who come back disabled, for example, having lost an arm or a leg?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes. In terms of pension rights, a distinction is made between physical wounds and mental or psychological illness following traumatic events in the theatre of operation. There are indeed two categories covered by these pension rights.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I want to come back to a question you were asked earlier. For example, if a 20-year-old man joins the army and retires after 25 years, is he entitled to a pension?

Col Jean-Michel Verney: An immediate pension? No.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Immediately...

Col Jean-Michel Verney: No, if he has not been injured.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: ... after he retires.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Was he already receiving a pension?

Mr. Roger Gaudet: No.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: There may be some confusion about the words “pension” and “retirement”.

Mr. Roger Gaudet: Let us call it retirement. In Canada, someone who retires after 20 years in the Canadian army is entitled to a retirement pension. I consider them the same thing. He receives an amount from the government, perhaps not an extravagant amount, but a certain amount in order to be able to live.

Do you have that in France? It may not come under the veterans' programs but rather under National Defence; it may be not be the same budget.

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes. That is why I was a little uncomfortable about the question earlier. I want to come back to it now. I am sorry to dwell on this. When I talk about a pension, I am really talking about people who, at some point during their military career, become wounded or ill, and their wound or illness is recognized as resulting from an event related to their duty. Those people receive a pension of a certain amount, even if they are not on active service. If something happens to a 20-year-old man who still has 20 years to serve, he will receive a pension, but it will be a minimum amount. That is because he will still be receiving his pay because he will continue to work. When he stops working or leaves the army, he will receive a full pension in keeping with his disability level or his rank when he left the army. We are really talking about a pension here.

Retirement, on the other hand, is subject to the rules governing retirement for public servants. Let us take the example of an army officer. In the army, there are career officers and contract officers. If a career officer, who would spend his career in the army, decides to leave suddenly after 20 years, he will not get a pension until after 25 years of service, because he is still active. A 20-year-old colonel will be entitled to a retirement pension after 25 years. That is how it works.

On the other hand, a contract officer in the army who stays 12 years—we are not talking about a career here, but 12 years with renewals—after 12 years he is entitled to a retirement pension that does not really enable him to stop working. He has to find another job. So if we are talking about pensions, yes, he can get a pension after just 12 years in the army if he is a contract officer. A career officer will get a full pension at the maximum age for his rank, that is, after 25 years. That is retirement. There is really no connection with the pension. These are two completely different things.

• (1640)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen. That's the time.

We'll now have Madam O'Neill-Gordon.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to thank you and welcome you for being with us this afternoon.

You spoke earlier about when the spouse or the widow of a military person receives a pension as well. I'm wondering whether, besides receiving a pension, they also inherit or have offered to them the same benefits as the military would have received, such as free medicare or necessary equipment or access to certain institutions. Or do they just get the pension?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Thank you, Madam. It is not just limited to the pension. It basically depends on compensation or other rights which were acquired by the person who has died. If you are referring to access to specific medical treatments, that is a right which is directly connected to the deceased spouse. It therefore also applies to treatment and equipment.

However, if you are talking about tax benefits, access to insured pensions and access to the Office National des Anciens Combattants, those rights remain. The rights which are directly connected to the person, that is, those mainly pertaining to benefits based on a person's physical or mental state, disappear when that person dies.

But the widow is still entitled to mainly tax benefits, on top of the pension of the deceased spouse. A little earlier, I talked about complicated math. The pension is not completely reconverted. It depends on the level of disability of the person. If the level of disability is less than 40%, there is a very complicated formula which applies to the pension conversion rate. If the person is incapacitated by over 40%, the conversion is more complete.

[English]

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. McColeman, do you have a question?

Mr. Phil McColeman: Sure.

Which of the programs and services that are provided are mostly utilized by your veterans? Which programs receive the biggest uptake?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I know that veterans mostly use the veterans' mutual insurance company. The French government contributes to the plan, and premiums paid are tax deductible. The vast majority of veterans appreciate this plan, which allows them to pay premiums without being penalized for it. As well, when a veteran turns 65, the pension is paid out and it is tax-free, which represents a double advantage. In my view, this type of pension paid out of a mutual insurance plan is a must for veterans.

A measure which is also greatly appreciated by veterans is administered under the Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre, and it provides mainly social and administrative support, be it in terms of treatment, loans, help with paper work, and there usually is someone close by to provide guidance. For instance, in the case of a family which is already dealing with a difficult situation, and which is forced to deal with complicated administrative procedures, there would be someone nearby, at the regional level to directly help that family. Of course, social and administrative support are not only provided through this national office. The various branches of the military, including the ground forces, also support the wounded when they return from a mission. It's what we call the ground forces support cell for injured soldiers, and it provides support and psychological guidance, concrete help and psychological counselling for families.

So I think that the most important way to help is to have someone on the ground, close by, who can help the soldiers and their families. As I said in my introduction, we also have tax benefits relating to insured pensions which are guaranteed by the state and which have been increased given the economic crisis.

●(1645)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Colonel.

At this point there's a second round for the Conservative Party. Does someone have another question?

Mr. Greg Kerr: I do have one, Mr. Chair.

We find in our system, Colonel, that there's a lot of consultation. A lot of the veterans groups are in constant contact with government to discuss the various programs and make recommendations or offer opinions or criticism or whatever the case might be. How is the consultation process carried out in your system?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Thank you, sir.

There are 7,300 veterans' associations in France, including 500 national associations. This represents a huge network of associations. As far as I know, the Minister for Veterans Affairs consults with these associations, but they also help with the day-to-day management of the national organization for veterans' affairs. There are ways for members to help develop the tools which are made available for veterans.

In answer to the question as to whether there is a dedicated forum to encourage dialogue between the department and veterans' associations, I don't know.

[English]

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you. Those are all the questions I had listed.

Phil.

Mr. Phil McColeman: This relates to the appeals process, I suppose. If a veteran is unhappy with the decision rendered by the department, what options are available to him?

●(1650)

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes, sir, we can discuss the case of an individual soldier coming back from a mission abroad with a disability. There is a process to have the disability recognized. First, there is a form to fill out, of course. Then, the level of disability of the veteran is assessed by physicians who have been certified by the department. These are usually physicians who have a private practice or who work in civilian or military hospitals. So the group of medical specialists assesses the level of disability and then gives its reports to the veteran.

If the veteran's disability is recognized, the file goes through all the normal channels of the Defence Department. It is transferred to the Pension Service and to the Department of Finance which ultimately validates or invalidates the pension application. If the pension is validated, it will be paid out. However, if the veteran does not agree with the rate of disability assessed by the medical specialists, or if there is no finding of level of disability, a review is conducted by a commission of reform comprised of military officers who are still in service and chaired by a military doctor. If the veteran disagrees with the finding of the commission of reform, the veteran has six months to file an appeal with the provincial Pension Tribunal. The applicant can also file an appeal with the regional Pension Tribunal. So the appeal would move from the provincial to the regional level and the matter could ultimately be appealed to the Conseil d'État, which is the highest Court of Appeal. This court hears cases involving rights, including pension rights.

To summarize, if there is a consensus, the medical specialist assesses the level of disability, and the level of disability is ultimately validated by the Department of Defence and the Finance Department. However, if there is disagreement, there is a legal avenue available to the applicant, which begins at the provincial level, and moves to the regional level, and ultimately ends up at the federal level, the Cour de Cassation, the highest appellate court, in cases where the applicant is not satisfied or where the government maintains its original assessment.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Thank you once again, Colonel.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Stoffer, for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sir, how many people work in the department for veterans affairs in France?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: That's a very good question. Are you just referring to the Department of Foreign Affairs or to all of the provincial institutions and directorates?

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, just in veterans affairs.

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I don't have the numbers for that.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Okay. In Canada, we have a program that allows veterans and/or their spouses to stay in their homes longer if they have a disability pension from the government. For example, if a World War II veteran is 84 years old and he's in his home and needs help with groundskeeping or housekeeping services, if he's receiving a pension, then he can apply for what we call the veterans independence program, which allows him to stay in his home longer. Does France have a program similar to that?

•(1655)

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Yes, absolutely. I spoke mostly about disability pensions, but also about military rank. When the disability rate exceeds 85%, the pension is topped up with benefits which are

paid out mainly to veterans who have suffered a high degree of mutilation or who have been rendered severely disabled. The benefits go up depending on the assessed level of disability. If the level of disability exceeds 85%, there is a staggered system of benefits which is paid on top of the pension. Further, aside from these benefits, there is financial support for a third party for severely disabled and mutilated veterans to hire a permanent caregiver in the home, as well as a special benefit for people who need nursing services.

So there is much more help available than a pension for a veteran with an assessed rate of disability. There are other support measures available depending on the needs of a person, including financial support to hire a full-time caregiver in the home.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: We're noticing now that more and more of our young veterans are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One of the difficulties we have in Canada is finding qualified people who are trained psychologists or people with psychiatric training to assist them, not just within the military but in private life as well. Does France have the similar problem of soldiers coming back with psychological problems? Do you have the adequate personnel to be able to deal with their specific problems in that regard, or are you short as well?

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: We share the same problems that Canada has. Those illnesses are very insidious and not always easy to diagnose. In fact, very few countries have a lot of experience in this area. Perhaps this is mainly due to the military itself, which is still reluctant to recognize this type of pathology because it is not always easy to explain in a military context.

In my view, France is in the same position as Canada. There is probably still a lot of room for improvement to help people suffering psychological damage when they come home.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Dryden, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Hon. Ken Dryden: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Colonel, my question is almost identical to that of Mr. Stoffer. It is regarding the transition of veterans from military to civilian life, as well as their training needs and other such things. I am not necessarily interested in the medical or psychological aspects.

Things were different 50 or 60 years ago, when almost an entire generation experienced the same conditions. Those people collectively experienced the transition from war to peace. Few people experience that today. For private companies that offer training, things are not the same as five years ago. Today, veterans must pursue training in schools and institutions.

Do the programs and services in France reflect the differences between veterans' affairs of years passed and present? Today's veterans share a unique experience that is different from those of their colleague who are five years older than they are. They have to make a transition and find a job.

• (1700)

Col Jean-Michel Verney: I think that that is probably a weakness, at least in France. Clearly, as you have said, today's veterans are different from those of the First and Second World Wars. There are many veterans who must face very different situations. When they leave the army or want to benefit from professional retraining, their program is likely to be very personalized.

I think that what the government is trying to do is to increase the funding for those schools engaged in retraining. The government has placed great importance on this issue. In my opening remarks, I said that the actions taken today in France with regard to its veterans do not lie in the pursuit of new approaches, but in the proper allocation of funding to support them.

In fact, one has to recognize that the status of veterans is relatively broad, because today's army has to be ready to be deployed. All active military personnel find themselves at one time or another in a theatre of operations and are almost certainly defined as veterans.

As a result, we are obliged to offer benefits to an increasing number of personnel. There is a very significant increase in the number of French veterans. The budgets must reflect that, and I believe that one of the department's major challenges is to be able to support all those benefits, not only as a budget line item, but according to the diverse circumstances involved.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen.

The rotation goes back to the Conservative Party now. Do we have some questions on this side?

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think we're fine, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: He has answered the questions?

Then I'll ask the Bloc Québécois. Do you have any questions? *Pas de question, monsieur?*

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: That's it.

[English]

The Chair: The Liberal Party?

Mr. Stoffer?

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Colonel.

[English]

We really appreciate your taking the time, and you were very confident in answering a host of questions from a robust field of expertise. So thank you very much.

We'll take a couple of minutes to break right now.

[Translation]

Col Jean-Michel Verney: Thank you.

• (1705)

[English]

The Chair: Then we'll come back to do some other committee business. If you'd like to bid the colonel farewell, please do.

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_____ (Pause) _____

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The Chair: Let's come back now, ladies and gentlemen, to some committee business.

Mr. Kerr has something that he wants to deal with for the record. Then we'll get into six different items that we have to deal with.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did mention this—actually, Scott wasn't there at the time—to the other two gentleman. It's just to correct a comment by the Honourable Albina Guarnieri, when she was here, representing duty that day. There was a wonderful exchange between her and the minister, very engaging.

At one point they were talking about the losses in Afghanistan, and she suggested that none happened during her ministry, and I just want to put on the record that there actually were casualties at the very start under her ministry. I just want to correct the record.

The Chair: Is there any other conversation to that regard?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Then we'll get into the business at hand.

We're having some difficulty lining up witnesses for the next meeting. In fact, those from Veterans Affairs in the U.S. felt that our questions were going to be broad-ranging to the degree that they wanted us to go to Washington. So we could talk about that, but I'm thinking about the expense and the time that would take. Of course, again, I always say that I'm at the behest of the committee, but I'm wondering if we may go back to them and ask for two video sessions or some other way of facilitating this without travelling. We already have two trips to be talking about right now, but I'm open for dialogue on this.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The last time I mentioned something called the George Reed hospital, but it's actually the Walter Reed Hospital. George Reed was a football player with the Saskatchewan Roughriders.

It would be interesting to see, with the new administration in the United States, when they say they're going to put a big focus on improving benefits for veterans, exactly what they mean by that, and what were the deficiencies before and what improvements they would like to see in the future under the new economic circumstances. If it can be done by video, great, but if not, a visit to the Walter Reed Hospital would be fantastic. We could compare that to, say, Ste. Anne's Hospital in Quebec. It would be quite interesting.

• (1710)

The Chair: Is there anybody else on this topic?

Michel, go ahead.

Mr. Michel Rossignol: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I just wanted to point out that the Walter Reed Hospital is the army medical centre. It's a military administration. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has its own medical facilities for veterans. So a trip might be possible to the Walter Reed Hospital, but there are also Veterans Affairs-administered facilities that would be available for a visit or for discussions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman: I would be inclined not to travel. I think the questions Mr. Stoffer presented are readily answerable via video conference or another fashion, and I just think it's money we should not be spending.

The Chair: I'll just remind the committee, too, that we can push, but they've already made it clear that they don't prefer this. But we might be able to ask them for two meetings.

Is there any further discussion on this from anybody?

Mr. Greg Kerr: We are going to give them videos, though, is that correct? They're asking for videos.

The Chair: Well, the consensus seems to be that if we can get it somehow on a video conference, whether it's one or two meetings, that would be the preference of the committee.

Is that correct? Do I see some nodding heads on that?

Of course, if we can't, then we'll have to talk about a different strategy.

Monsieur Gaudet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: There is one thing I would like to raise. This afternoon, Colonel Verney appeared before us but did not answer all of our questions. If we hear from a witness, I would like him to answer our questions. I realize that he is a press secretary for the French army, but it would have been useful to hear from someone who could have given us concrete answers. And yet, everyone had prepared good questions. I believe my colleagues were disappointed by what they heard, and their questions then became less relevant. I agree that we should hold a video conference, but we should invite someone who can answer our questions. Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Gaudet, I agree with you 100%, and I'm glad you brought it up. I was thinking, though this will take some time, we can extract from the blues where the questions were not answered specifically. I think we can follow up with a letter to the colonel, and then he can get those answers for us. It would be, of course, on his volition, but we'll ask.

You were clear on the instruction for the U.S. We'll try to get it by video, whatever way possible.

The second thing we needed to talk about was the supplementary estimates (C). We dealt with the (B) estimates the last time, and they were tabled in the House on February 12. We need to respond to the House on that. There's nothing unusual on them. They should be

distributed to you, is that correct? Then I'll be waiting for you to give me some idea if you want to have a meeting around those supplementaries. I think we should, obviously, but whether we want to call the minister or whether we want to deal with them in dialogue here....

I'll deal with points three and four. There are two events happening this week. One is the memory project, and the other is the event for the ANAVETS. They've both asked us if we can get back to them to RSVP on who exactly is going.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Who was the second one?

• (1715)

The Chair: The ANAVETS, the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada Association, friends of veterans. It's on Thursday from 11:30 to 2:30. You could give me an idea about whether or not you are going, for both events.

Why don't we start with the memory project right now. Who will be attending the memory project breakfast? That's Thursday morning.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I apologize, Mr. Chair, but I will not be here on Thursday morning. I will be back in the afternoon. I will be outside of the House of Commons.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay, so we'll give—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: As for Mr. André, I do not know. He was not able to attend today.

[*English*]

The Chair: We can only do our best on that. We'll give your regards to them.

Who will be attending? Can I see a show of hands again, just so the clerk can make sure we have a record of that? This is the memory project, the breakfast.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I notified Guy André, who will call Erica.

[*English*]

The Chair: The next will be for the ANAVETS luncheon. Who will be attending the ANAVETS luncheon? Mr. Kerr and Mr. Stoffer. I believe I have confirmed with them directly.

Yes, Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews: What about tomorrow at the Ottawa operational stress injury clinic? Are we going as a group to that?

Mr. Greg Kerr: It would be nice.

An hon. member: Actually, most of us can't go.

The Chair: We won't be travelling as a group, but everybody was invited individually. I know of a couple of people who are going.

This is the operational stress injury clinic. Who's going tomorrow? Mr. Andrews?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I'll call your office.

Mr. Greg Kerr: Everybody is either on House duty or at committee tomorrow morning, so perhaps we can get someone to replace us. I'll get Ken to sit on my House duty, and maybe I can go.

The Chair: That would work great, actually.

The next item is the two budgets for Charlottetown. One is for a charter flight—we can get there and back in one day—and the other is the commercial flight that would be a day and a half, so there would be an evening in a hotel as well. We haven't received the specific itinerary from Veterans Affairs on Prince Edward Island. There was a serious snowstorm today in Atlantic Canada, so I guess they weren't able to get in. But they have assured the clerk that they will be communicating with us by Wednesday on the agenda.

I'm open for discussion on this. We have the one day at \$31,000 and two days at \$39,000. The two issues at hand are money and timing.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Well, if you want to provide an economic stimulus package to Charlottetown, the \$39,000 trip would be the one to go on. The reality is that you can do it in one day; you don't need to overnight. But Charlottetown is a good place to hang out, if you want to.

The Chair: Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Out of curiosity, when are we were looking at doing it? It would be counterproductive from our end to come here and then go there. If we could do it on a Monday, we could do it en route to Ottawa. It might make more sense.

The Chair: The complication with Monday...and again, I'm certain—

Mr. Scott Andrews: I don't know what day we were talking about going.

The Chair: I'll open it up for questioning.

We were talking about that in the planning for Ste. Anne's too. It benefits some people, but then it becomes a detriment to others, depending on where they're coming from. I'm certainly open. I think we had left it loose for a time period in April; I don't think we ever discussed a specific day.

Is there any other conversation on this?

Mr. McColeman.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Would we be planning this while the House is sitting? I know there's a two-week break in April for constituency work.

• (1720)

The Chair: I don't have the blues in front of me, but I believe we initially planned this for a regular meeting day.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Good. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Andrews and then Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Scott Andrews: I think it would be easier for our scheduling if we planned our own itinerary. That's my comment on which budget we should choose.

The Chair: If we have the charter we're basically all on one flight. That's \$31,000.

The clerk has made the good point that once you begin to plan your own itinerary, it goes off your MOB, not the committee's. If we're going on a trip like this, you pretty well follow the group.

We're such a good group. We like to stick together.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I find the best day to leave without interrupting too many other things is Wednesday. We all have our caucus mornings and then it's question period and then we have our committee afterwards. That's basically most of our days. So without disrupting all the other things we do, in my experience the best day for one-day travel is Wednesday.

The Chair: Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think we were trying to do it on a committee day, so that would probably fit. When we first talked it was going to be on a regular committee day, so it would be when the House is sitting, for one thing.

I really think we should go as a group from here. It takes the pressure off the whips as well if we're all going together. And I agree totally with the charter flight. We can get down there, get the business done and get back. It's still a fair chunk of change to get us there and back.

And before we finalize, I assume we're going to have a full agenda so we aren't just going sightseeing.

The Chair: That's correct. A bit of our conversation is preliminary in the sense that we haven't got anything from Veterans Affairs. We're hoping they will be able to fit in whatever they're going to show us within that timeframe for the charter flight.

Mr. Gaudet.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I would like to know how long it takes to fly from here to Prince Edward Island.

[*English*]

Mr. Greg Kerr: It's about an hour and 40 minutes. It depends when the charter plane leaves.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: In my opinion, if we want to be able to talk to those who work there, we should not spend too much time in buses or planes. Personally, I would prefer staying there for two days. Otherwise, it would just be a flying visit, a bit like Mr. Obama's trip here last week. I would ask you to consider that. I will leave it up to you to decide. I will respect the consensus. We could leave Wednesday morning and be back in time for the Thursday afternoon committee meetings.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Gaudet.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Gaudet, I've been there twice, and really what takes most of the time is the discussion with VRAB. Most of it is introductory, and then they explain the building and why it's there. Then you go into the casework files on people from across the country who are calling in. They show you how they process them and how they go from this desk to that desk. That takes about two or three hours. What takes most of the time is the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. A lot of you will have questions about what happens when someone is denied, and how that is judged based on someone's experience or whatever. That usually takes up a lot of time, because they get quite defensive about that.

That leads me back to my statement earlier. I know I'm bootlegging here, but I had asked the deputy minister a question before—and I was hoping she would have responded to us by now—on the number of people in VRAB who have a medical or military background. We haven't received that information yet. Is it possible to remind her that we asked her that question? Hopefully we can get that information from her.

The Chair: We'll do that follow-up.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: So you only really need one day, Mr. Gaudet, to be honest with you, and you'll be happy. You may not like the answers, but you should be satisfied. They're nice people.

The Chair: Is there any more dialogue on that? No?

Am I to understand that the consensus is that you'll pursue the one day? It still, of course, is contingent upon whips and contingent upon getting the budget passed at the other committee.

Would we be looking for the last Wednesday of April, if I may suggest a date? The House will be back then. Does that make sense?

• (1725)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Sure.

The Chair: So that would be April 29. We'll target for that. If we have any issues, then I will advise you.

Agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Did we pass out an itinerary for Ste. Anne's? It's on the way here.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have one last point regarding March 30. We will be leaving for Ste. Anne's at 8:30. Where will we be leaving from—the Centre Block?

Mr. Greg Kerr: Tilly, why don't you raise that? You had a concern about the day.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: Monday is a difficult day when everyone's travelling to get there, I thought.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: What date are we looking at?

The Chair: It's Monday, March 30.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: I myself will be leaving from home and stopping on the way.

[English]

The Chair: Does anybody else have any concerns about March 30?

Mr. Greg Kerr: That's what I say; there's a difference of opinion.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon: What time is it at?

The Chair: We get on the bus here at 8:30.

So we'll try to have more dialogue. It sounds like for the future we might want to stick to Wednesdays.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Wednesday is a good day. Do we avoid caucus?

Mr. Greg Kerr: We won't tell Jack you said that.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I've said it many times.

The Chair: Is there enough momentum to change this to Wednesday, or do you want to stick with March 30?

Mr. Peter Stoffer: We can have our own caucus meeting on the bus.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I think, in general, a number have expressed a concern that Monday is a difficult day. On Wednesday we're all going to be available, because it's a committee day anyway.

The Chair: All right, then, the Wednesday would be April 1.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: The day Canada joined Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Chair: Everybody's departing, so we need to have some kind of agreement.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Greg Kerr: I agree with Peter. Move it to Wednesday.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Gaudet: We will miss the Wednesday caucus meetings. We will also be absent in April. I am not sure whether the whips will agree to our being absent from two caucus meetings within the same month. We are off during the week of April 5th. There will not be any caucus meetings on April 8th and 15th. I do not know whether they will agree to our not being there on the 29th. That would leave only one caucus meeting for the month of April. In any case, I am okay with that.

• (1730)

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Is it April 1 or March 30?

Those in favour of March 30 as set? Those for April 1, on a Wednesday? Okay, it is Wednesday, then.

This meeting is adjourned.

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