



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

ACVA • NUMBER 043 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, March 31, 2015

Chair

Mr. Royal Galipeau

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC)): Good morning.

[Translation]

This morning, we are starting our 43rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[English]

We're taking a break from the study on the transition of members of the military with the Department of National Defence to veterans. Instead, we will be hearing from representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs: Sue Foster, assistant deputy minister of communications and commemoration; John Desrosiers, acting director of commemoration operations; as well as from retired Major-General Richard Rohmer, special adviser to the minister.

[Translation]

The goal of their presentation is to provide an update on the commemoration activities of the Department of Veterans Affairs and to discuss some commemoration initiatives. We are dealing with this topic today, since this is when retired Major-General Rohmer is available.

[English]

This will be the only item on the orders of the day for today's meeting, and the nature of the meeting will be very similar to the Nijmegen march meeting from a few weeks back.

Major-General, we are ready to be enlightened by you.

Major-General (Retired) Richard Rohmer (Special Advisor to the Minister, Senior Canadian Veteran for the Battle of the Liberation of the Netherlands, Department of Veterans Affairs): We are ready at this end too, Mr. Chairman. We are not particularly well-prepared, but we're ready.

Voices: Oh, oh!

I'm the adviser to the minister, and the adviser does not make any decisions. The decisions are made by the people who are here with me and those with the minister. I'm protecting myself to start with because the people with me know all about what we're doing. I only know fragmentary matters. I don't know that I know them that much, being an air force person.

Ms. Sue Foster (Assistant Deputy Minister, Communications and Commemoration, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you, General Rohmer.

General Rohmer is very humble obviously.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee. As Mr. Galipeau said, my name is Sue Foster.

[Translation]

I am the Assistant Deputy Minister of Policy, Communications and Commemoration at Veterans Affairs Canada.

[English]

Yesterday marked my five-month anniversary at Veterans Affairs Canada, so I'm a relatively new member to the department, and have been enjoying lots of fun and festivity over the last several months there. We've been very busy.

[Translation]

This is my first time appearing before the committee. I am pleased to be here to tell you about the upcoming commemorative activities of Veterans Affairs Canada.

[English]

Joining me at the table, as you know, is Major-General Richard Rohmer. General Rohmer serves as the minister's special adviser. He's also the senior Canadian veteran of the battle of the liberation of the Netherlands. I am also joined by John Desrosiers, our director of commemoration operations.

Our presentation today is separated into three main parts. First, we will provide some background, to explain the heightened period of commemoration with regard to World War I and World War II, followed by an overview of the Government of Canada's plans to mark the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign.

Today General Rohmer and I will focus on two of these initiatives. The first is the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign, an important battle in the history of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. Then we'll talk about the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands.

We'll begin with slide 4. I believe you have a deck in front of you with some background information. The 100th and 75th anniversaries of World War I and World War II from 2014 to 2020 represent a unique opportunity for Canadians to reflect on our country's long and proud military history. Throughout this period, Veterans Affairs Canada, in collaboration with Canadian Heritage and many other partners in Canada and abroad, will carry out a variety of commemorative activities marking the tremendous sacrifices and accomplishments of all of those who served.

● (0850)

[*Translation*]

On behalf of the Government of Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada is responsible for the maintenance of 14 memorials in France, Belgium and England. Those memorials commemorate Canadians and Newfoundlanders, men and women, who served during the First World War and the Second World War.

We are expecting a higher number of Canadian visitors to those memorials between 2014 and 2020. Veterans Affairs Canada will ensure that the visitors' experiences continue to be rich and meaningful, especially through the services provided by the student guides at the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial and the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France.

[*English*]

The heightened period of remembrance will provide all Canadians with the extraordinary opportunity to celebrate their proud heritage, but most importantly to honour those who served and continue to serve our country to uphold the values of peace, freedom, and democracy.

As shown on slide 5, the next milestone anniversary the department will be marking is, as I mentioned, the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign. Also known as the Dardanelles campaign, the Battle of Gallipoli, or the Battle of Çanakkale—I think they put these words in here to test me. This was a campaign of the First World War that took place on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey between April 25, 1915 and January 9, 1916.

The 10-month campaign was the first major battle undertaken in the war by Australia and New Zealand and is often considered to mark the birth of national consciousness in both of these countries. The date of landing, April 25, known as Anzac Day, remains the most significant commemoration of military casualties in those two countries.

When Britain entered the First World War on August 4, 1914, Newfoundland, which was then a British dominion, was suddenly at war too. Gallipoli was the first of many battles that would earn the Newfoundland Regiment an impressive reputation during the First World War, earning them the title “Royal”. Of 47 members of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who are known to have died during the Gallipoli campaign, 24 are buried on the peninsula. In comparison with Australia's and New Zealand's, Canada's contribution to Gallipoli was less significant, its main effort being to treat the wounded in military hospitals situated around the eastern Mediterranean. Each year, ceremonies are held on the Gallipoli peninsula on April 24 and 25. These ceremonies are normally attended by a small contingent from the Canadian embassy in Ankara.

I will turn to slide 6. As 2015 marks the centennial of the Gallipoli campaign, there is great interest by Australia and New Zealand in marking this milestone anniversary. As such, the Turkish government has capped attendance at 10,500, which is driven by the capacity at the site. Canada has been allotted 10 spots, with the understanding that Canada will coordinate Newfoundland and Labrador's participation within this allotment.

To pay respects to the Newfoundlanders who lost their lives, Veterans Affairs Canada is working with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment to identify a regimental delegation. We anticipate the participation of the honorary colonel, Lieutenant Governor Frank Fagan, to attend the Royal Newfoundland contingent. The remaining spots will be filled with commissioned and non-commissioned officers. We anticipate that five representatives from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment will join the delegation.

Slide 7 shows an overview of the schedule, which consists of the regiment's departing Newfoundland on April 21; a peace summit for heads of delegation in Istanbul on April 23; ceremonies at the Turkish, French, and British monuments in Çanakkale on April 24; and the signature event, a dawn service at Anzac Cove on the morning of April 25, followed by memorial services by the Turkish and New Zealanders. The Canadian delegation will follow a private program on April 26, with visits to Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries to conduct wreath layings to pay tribute to the fallen Newfoundlanders. The delegation returns to Canada on April 28.

Planning is also in full swing at Veterans Affairs Canada for the 70th anniversary of the liberation of The Netherlands.

Before I go into specific detail about the Government of Canada's activities for this anniversary, I would like to invite the minister's special adviser, Major-General Richard Rohmer, who is also the senior Canadian veteran of the liberation of The Netherlands, to provide background on the battle.

We are on slide 8 now.

● (0855)

MGen Richard Rohmer: Thank you.

Let me say to you that I am, indeed, the senior Canadian veteran of the battle of the freedom of the Netherlands. It's a function of age, among other things.

My part in the battle was in the air force with 430 Squadron, operating out of the great city of Eindhoven in Holland. I was a fighter pilot flying Mustang fighters doing fighter reconnaissance. Our job in our Mustangs was to support the army. We did low-level reconnaissance, visual, photographic, and the direction of artillery fire. Our job was not to shoot down other airplanes. Our job was to support the army, and that we did, I think, reasonably well.

When we got to a place called Venlo in Holland, Peter will tell you I knocked the bridges down at Venlo on November 19 with a huge artillery piece fired by the British battery. It was an eight-inch gun. Montgomery had decided that the bridges had to come down because the Germans were taking a lot of equipment across as they retreated, and so Montgomery said it had to be done, had to be done.

I was really old at the time. I was 20. I knew one end of an airplane from the other, and that was about it. In any event, I had done a lot of artillery shoots in Normandy, so I was selected to do this shoot. The gun was called a Super Heavy gun. It turned out to be an eight-inch American gun that the British had put together and were able to take into the battle area. It was the first time it had been fired. I was able, in contact with my radio at the battery, to range the shots.

For those of you who know artillery, the time of flight of the shells was 55 seconds. I had been operating with 150 millimetre guns elsewhere, and when the first shell hit, it hit right in the centre of Venlo. I was astonished by the amount of damage that was done, but I was able to get the shells landing on the other side of Maas River and eventually I left with the shells landing right beside the bridge, 14 miles away from the gun, and in the morning the bridges were down. I have a full record of that from British people. The battery commander never reported at all that the bridges were down because it had been ranged by an air force pilot, and a colonial at that. In any event, we got it down.

My time in the air force and in Holland was quite enlightening, at least it was for me, and I was able to survive the event. So I am now the senior person.

My notes indicate this, that from the fall of 1944 to the spring of 1945, the First Canadian Army played a major role in liberating The Netherlands and its people who had really suffered a great deal under the Germans.

The army was international in nature: our Canadian army, and the British, Polish, American, Belgian, and Dutch, totalling anywhere around 105,000 soldiers and more. We had 15 Canadian fighter squadrons involved in that battle, which was a very large presence of Spitfires, Typhoons and Mustangs.

More than 7,600 Canadians died during the nine-month liberation battle. That's a huge number when you look at it. A vast number of our Canadian lads are buried in Holland, and that speaks also to the respect that the Dutch have for Canada, the amount of sacrifice that was made. The Germans were really tough to battle with. We know that the Dutch treat us very kindly, and I have had the opportunity of being over there three times now for their great celebrations at the beginning of May.

● (0900)

In terms of Canada's involvement on May 5, the German generals surrendered to Canadian General Foulkes and Prince Bernhard at Wageningen. In a visit to Wageningen, where they have a huge parade on May 5 that is enormous, I had the opportunity to meet Prince Bernhard in 2004 and we became good friends. It's a major part of what we're going to be doing in relation to the celebration and commemorations in Holland this spring.

We leave here on May 1. On May 1 and May 2 the air force was organized to get us across with one or two Airbuses. There's always a discussion about whether we should have one or two, but we think we need two. We'll get that done. The Prime Minister will be over with us as well. Indeed our own minister will go for a short period of time and we will be able to celebrate first of all at Groesbeek, the great cemetery in Holland where a host of Canadians are buried.

That will be on May 3. The next one is at Holten, which is the following day, and we will participate in that activity. The Dutch take care of our grave-sites extremely well and have their young people involved in terms of keeping them up.

The Minister of Veterans Affairs will be with us part of the time that we're going to be in Holland. The Prime Minister and Mrs. Harper will be there part of the time as well.

We are anticipating taking about 80 veterans of the battle. About 50 will be part of the official party and the others will be able to come through a subsidy of \$2,000 for travel. We did that with Juno Beach as well and we're going to do it again in Holland. We have about 80 veterans now who are signed up either as the official party or under the \$2,000 in travel assistance. The travel assistance also provides \$2,000 for caregivers, if you will, to travel with the veterans. At the age of 91 I'm in very good shape. A lot of my colleagues are a bit older than that and they're not in the same condition that I happen to be at the moment. I'm in pretty good shape, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: That was a strong hug this morning.

MGen Richard Rohmer: That was a strong one, absolutely. Of course I'm six feet four inches tall. I'm not really your height.

The Chair: And a star basketball player.

● (0905)

MGen Richard Rohmer: Yes.

I'm the honorary of everything in sight in the Toronto area. The chief of police is just retiring. His name is Bill Blair. He's very famous and has been a fantastic chief for 10 years. He decided that it would be appropriate, because I'm six-foot-four and he is, that I should be an honorary chief of police of Toronto. So on Thursday of this last week, in my new uniform, I appeared at his office, with his senior staff. After great talking, because he talks a lot, and I listen a great deal—

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Like this morning.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Yes, like this morning. I stood next to him, looked him right in the eye, and he formally presented me with my chief of police honorary badge and the card with my photograph on it and so forth. That was a very significant thing for me. Now I'm the honorary chief of police of Toronto. On my identification card, because there are a lot of honorary chiefs of police in Toronto, premiers and politicians and great people like that, my number is zero. It's significant that it's zero, and not one or five or whatever. It's zero. It means that I will have to be very careful in everything I do in Toronto now. When I go back today, I'll tell the chief that I was here, report to him that everyone treated me very carefully and nicely.

My name, by the way, is from Alsace. Rohmer. It sounds German, but it's a good French name. I had to put that in just so that you would understand.

Now this is the important thing, and I keep saying this, advising the minister—it's about the only thing I do because I don't make any decisions—you must concentrate on the veterans. The event is for them. Even though they're old and decrepit, they made a great contribution a long time ago, and the Dutch are the people who really respect them, so every focus will be in terms of what we're doing on looking after the veterans.

The minister has designated that there will be about nine or ten cadets from the Royal Military College of Canada travelling with us. They will be able to help the veterans. In Normandy we had a group from the Toronto Paramedic Services, of which I happen to be the honorary chief—it's just one of the things—and they looked after the veterans very well. They had to carry them off buses and airplanes and so forth and it worked very well. This time we're going to have some cadets from the Royal Military College.

The big event that we will participate in, again, is the big parade on May 5 at Wageningen. Arrangements have been made for the veterans to take part. Those who can't walk will go by vehicle. The Prime Minister will be able to say a few words during the ceremony. The town itself comes together with all its roads in the centre, and that's where the parade comes through. The saluting base is in that location as well. Canada has always taken a substantial part in the parade, and there will be with us in Holland about 150 members of our armed forces, both army and air force particularly. I had breakfast this morning with the Chief of the Defence Staff—he sent his respects to you—in English this morning. That's the way we operate. It works very well. He and I go way back to when he was a boy.

Yes?

The Chair: General, I wonder how much more time you need for your charming presentation. You've been at it for 22 minutes now and Prince Peter and Prince Francis over there, they have some tough questions for you and we want to leave them some time.

• (0910)

MGen Richard Rohmer: Well, Chairman, I'm always cognizant of the caution from the chair about time, but because at my age, time doesn't mean much.

Voices: Oh, oh!

MGen Richard Rohmer: In any event, I'm fundamentally finished, except to say that we are really working hard on making this a significant one, because this celebration of Canada in Holland will be the last one of any significance due to the age factor. This is it.

My time is more than gone, and I appreciate the opportunity, Chair.

The Chair: I was completely mesmerized by your presentation. I thank you very much.

Does Mr. Desrosiers want to say a few words or is that it?

Ms. Foster, I just want to assure you that I didn't earn my "Royal" at Gallipoli. I earned it at St. Isidore.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We often hear about Canada's role in the Netherlands, not from Prince Bernhard but from Prince Peter, so now you can have an exchange with Prince Richard over there.

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

Well, at my age time does mean something.

First of all, General Rohmer, thank you once again for everything you've done, and thanks to Veterans Affairs for this tremendous commemoration that's about to come.

As you know, I won't be there with you, as I have a commemoration in Halifax that I'm doing, because we have our cenotaph in front of Pier 2, where most of the veterans left from and where those who could, came back, yourself as well.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Yes.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: It will be a tremendous event, I'm sure.

I have a couple of questions for you on the actual commemoration. On the 60th and 65th anniversaries, there are also commemorations by the Canadian government, with the Dutch government, at Camp Westerbork, which is in the central Netherlands. For those who don't know, Westerbork was a staging camp for all the so-called "undesirables" of the Netherlands and Belgium. They were rounded up, sent there, categorized, and then shipped off to Auschwitz, Dachau, and those areas.

One of the most beautiful monuments you could ever see are the rail lines that have been turned up and twisted. A Jewish prisoner of war at that time was an artist, and he came back, lifted up the rail lines and twisted them. That spiral symbolizes the souls that went off to heaven and the fact that no train would ever run on those tracks again.

Is the Canadian government planning to have commemorations at Camp Westerbork? That's my first question.

Mr. John Desrosiers (Acting Director, Commemoration Operations, Department of Veterans Affairs): Thank you for your question.

I'm John Desrosiers. I'm the project manager for the project on the liberation of the Netherlands. Our recce team was in the Netherlands in January and I had an opportunity to be at Camp Westerbork myself. It was a very impactful moment. I know exactly what you're talking about in terms of the tracks.

The Government of Canada delegation will be assisting in a ceremony on May 7 in Camp Westerbork. Our delegation itself, from a Veterans Affairs Canada perspective, will be 200-strong, including the veterans whom the Major General mentioned. It is a signature event that we had to place on the schedule, based on our experiences in 2005. It will take place on May 7.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

Also, the Newfoundland and Labrador government, as you know, has been in talks with the Turkish government. As you know, on most of the battle sites where Newfoundlanders participated, there is a statue of a caribou that faces the enemy, but they don't have one at Gallipoli yet. One of the concerns, of course, is that the Turkish government is still technically a little upset with us because of the motion on the Armenian genocide, but there have been talks between Newfoundland and Turkey in order to have a caribou statue placed where the Newfoundlanders fell at Gallipoli.

Have you been involved in any of those discussions? If you haven't, is it possible that you could bring it up when you're there to see if it is possible in the future that the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians could make the effort of putting their caribou statue there? The one that was supposed to be there now is in Bowring Park in St. John's, Newfoundland. That one was technically supposed to be in Gallipoli, but due to some political concerns, it's not there yet.

Are you aware of it? Do you have any thoughts at all on that?

Mr. John Desrosiers: The department is aware. We continue to work through the embassy in Ankara to help facilitate discussions with the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Turkish government. We will continue to facilitate those discussions and hopefully will have a favourable outcome in the near future.

• (0915)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Very good.

Well, on behalf of all of us here, thank you, General Rohmer and staff at DVA. I hope you have a wonderful commemorative event, and thank you for everything you've done.

MGen Richard Rohmer: It will be less because you won't be there.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: No, unfortunately. Well, we would get into some trouble, I can assure you, General Rohmer. Last time with Cliff Chadderton and the boys we got into a lot of trouble. But it was a lot of fun. It's a tremendous event. My mom's still alive, although she has Alzheimer's. If she were here right now, she'd give you a big hug.

Thank you very much, and I wish all of you the very best.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Lizon, go ahead.

[*English*]

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Thank you to all of you for coming.

General Rohmer, thank you for your great service. I didn't realize your presentation was 22 minutes. The chair didn't tell us. I grew up listening to war stories, and I can listen to them for hours, and I believe every single word you said, including how tall you are. However, I find it hard to believe—and you repeated it more than once—that you don't make any decisions. To me, a general not making decisions is quite odd, but if that's what you said—

MGen Richard Rohmer: You have to believe me. I'm not part Polish, but you have to believe me anyway.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: That's what I was going to mention. Peter Stoffer is originally from Holland. I was born and grew up in Poland, with the tradition of the 1st Polish Armoured Division that was part of the First Canadian Army, and of course, the paratroopers of General Sosabowski and Operation Market Garden. Still, when it comes up in discussion, especially Arnhem, it does bring up emotions and heated discussion, but this is something that should be dealt with by historians.

But, General, I had a chance, and Laurie Hawn did as well, to march with the Canadian army in the Nijmegen marches. I did it twice, last year and the year before, and of course on March 3, there is a wonderful commemoration ceremony at Groesbeek cemetery. I had the chance to go there and lay a wreath and walk between the graves, look at names. There were so many young people, very young people. Some of them probably lied about their age.

General, if I may ask, there is a list of all the celebrations, I don't know, but the commemoration of the VE Day victory on May—

MGen Richard Rohmer: May 5.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: On May 8 or 9, there will be one main celebration in Europe. I don't know where because Putin wants to do it in Moscow. Some leaders agree that they're not going to go to Moscow. Is there one planned where our government and Veteran Affairs will participate? I know there will be celebrations here in Canada, but what about in Europe?

Mr. John Desrosiers: From a Veterans Affairs Canada perspective, there is no plan to participate in any Victory of Europe Day on May 8 in Europe. We will concentrate on an event here at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, where we expect upwards of 200 Second World War veterans will attend. Our focus at this point is really the liberation of the Netherlands from May 1 to May 10, and working with the Dutch very closely in terms of their thematics. They want to have commemoration on May 3, 4, and 5, and after May 5 it becomes more of a celebration as we lead into May 9, and it will be the final farewell of Canada's veterans in Holland.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: The second question I have has to do with the Canadian participation in and contribution to the Second World War effort. It's not very well known and it is underestimated. If you look at the facts, on a per capita basis, Canada had, I think, one of the largest armies among the Allies. I think the only matching army would be the Soviet, and maybe the British. Others that participated had on a percentage basis much smaller armies. Poland had about 600,000, maybe 700,000. To match the Canadian contribution, they would have had to have about three and a half million in their army, and they didn't.

What are the plans? What are we doing to actually make sure that people, first of all, know about our contribution to the war efforts, and they know the facts? There is a proper approach to it. We were not somewhere at a table with everybody.... We were there as a main force to defeat Hitler.

● (0920)

MGen Richard Rohmer: Let me try to answer that.

I think that what we do, through Veterans Affairs and the great celebrations on D-Day in Holland and elsewhere, gives us a chance to really tell the story to the best of our ability. A good friend of mine is a fellow called Peter Mansbridge. Mansbridge of CBC was with us, for example, in Normandy in June, and right across Canada, and he covered us very well indeed. To tell the people of Canada about these things is the most important element of getting the message across, because we have so many new people in our country from all over the world, including Poland, and to get them familiar with the background of 70 years ago is extremely important. That is being done, and Peter will be there in Holland with us again. That is the kind of thing that I think is very important. It's the best way. If you want to do as the United States, that's a different matter. They...well, never mind.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Francis, it's your turn.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Thank you, everyone, for appearing before us today.

As a prelude to my question, I just want to say that, while I don't have any military pedigree in me whatsoever, I have been introduced to it all since becoming a member of Parliament. Not many people know this, but when I bought this old home in Guelph, which of course is the home of John McCrae, I found out that Admiral Sir Charles Kingsmill, the first admiral of the Canadian navy, was raised in the home in which I live.

When I found that out, I started to renovate the home, trying to restore it, and then worked closely with two navy veterans, David Birtwistle and John Newstead—John has passed away now—to commemorate the home in some way. It wasn't until that effort that I really began to appreciate the value of commemoration. We bought two large stones. I got permission from the Canadian navy to put two plaques on it, one commemorating the first home of Admiral Sir Charles Kingsmill, and the second, the 100th anniversary of the Canadian navy.

You remember that in 2010 we had this massive flag with Charles Kingsmill's picture on it. I was able to get one of those flags and hang it. We had a wonderful ceremony on July 3, 2010, on my front lawn—just for the record, at my own expense—with tents and all the colours and the bugles. We marched, and the navy was there. We spiced the brace with real rum. We did the whole thing. I'll tell you, it was so moving. What was really interesting is that, the day before, the granddaughter of Charles Kingsmill came to my home. She had never been to the home. She was born after Charles died. When I met her, I brought her into the home. It was her first time in the home. We were crying. It was just such an emotional experience.

However, I was never more moved than I was last year when Julian Fantino was gracious enough to invite me to accompany him

to the remembrance trails in France and Belgium. We walked all the paths, and we went to the monuments and the gravesites. We stood in Essex Farm Cemetery, where John McCrae wrote *In Flanders Fields*. While I was there, you could hear a pin drop. There were some young adults from Canada travelling the same trail, and it was quiet. They were sitting at the foot of the plaque commemorating John McCrae. One by one, three stood and recited the poem by John McCrae, and that was all you could hear through this whole cemetery. It was so moving. I don't think I have ever been more moved.

What I realized when I was over there is how much our presence in Europe is woven into the cultural fabric of France and Belgium, where I was. I can't speak for the other countries. We are very much part of their everyday conversation and to this day very present in their lives.

Having said that, my question is this. While I was over there, I noticed a lot of Canadian students working for us at all of these different sites, and my thought was that I didn't have the opportunity to appreciate Canada's military history, but I want my children to be able to. Can you tell us more about the opportunities that exist for our youth to go to Europe and work, what the conditions are like, and how long they might work there at all of our commemorative sites? I am wondering if anyone would have any information on that.

● (0925)

Mr. John Desrosiers I can perhaps speak quite briefly, particularly on our Vimy site. We have a student guide program, it's a university age-based program, through FSWEF, the federal student work experience program. Students identify their intentions through FSWEF. We have a quarterly update. They go for three months, live in the quarters in Arras, just outside Vimy.

They certainly become the Canadian ambassadors in northern France. They become very familiar with both Vimy and Beaumont Hamel. They take on that role as a student guide, both in English and in French. It's managed by our European operations. We have a team on site at Vimy. It's a continual intake of students.

In addition to the Veterans Affairs Canada program, Juno Beach Centre has an exchange program where they bring students from Canada, and they act through the guide program as well. I don't have as much detail on their uptake and how quickly they turn the students around.

Those are the two programs I'm currently familiar with in engaging students. If I may take this opportunity, certainly from the Veterans Affairs Canada perspective, it's very important to pass the torch of remembrance to students, both from learning materials, and as you mentioned earlier, awareness.

Any time we do an overseas program we have in-house educators that develop a teachers' curriculum that we promote in the school system. In the lead-up to any anniversary, we have that material flowing into the schools.

In addition, we're very fortunate that we have a number of battlefield tour companies in Canada that offer students an opportunity.

We know in the Netherlands upwards of 1,000 Canadian students will be walking and attending the same ceremonies that we'll be at. We make it a priority to integrate them into the programs: recite a commitment to remember; lay a wreath on behalf of youth. It's our way of ensuring that the youth come back. Through the use of social media, now with Twitter or a Facebook page, engaging one youth means engaging 10, and so on.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: When I was over there, I met a number of people at museums who were trying to commemorate Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae in a more meaningful way. They were looking for some connection with Canada. I introduced them to the principal of John McCrae Public School in Guelph to have an opportunity to have an exchange between students, through email, letters, whatever, so they could connect with one another and exchange ideas.

I'm just wondering what effort might be undertaken in a more meaningful way through the department to align other schools, say in France and Belgium, with public schools in Guelph and elsewhere that want to share their experiences, not their memories so much, of what they see in Europe, so our Canadian students can gain a better appreciation of our efforts there.

Mr. John Desrosiers: Entering the school curriculum is always a difficult challenge for the Government of Canada, in the sense that education is a provincial element. Certainly when we receive several requests similar to that, we facilitate those opportunities.

We work with Canadian schools and Canadian organizations looking to those exchanges. Through some of our funding programs, we have some examples of where we have made the link between both Canadians and students abroad.

With the use of Skype and other technologies, I think those exchanges are easily facilitated now. I'm aware of a twinning program going on right now with a number of schools in France and a number of schools in the Ontario Peel region.

It's getting out there. I wouldn't say Veterans Affairs Canada is a driving force in making those connections, but we would certainly facilitate and put schools together, if possible.

• (0930)

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: Could you send us the information on that exchange, so we might take it home to our ridings and encourage our school boards?

Mr. John Desrosiers: Absolutely.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you very much.

If you have a quick question at the very end, I'm sure the committee may indulge you.

Now, folks, we go to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, Mr. Pierre Lemieux, for seven minutes.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

First of all, thank you very much for your presentation. Certainly our actions in the Netherlands were critical moments in Canada's history.

General, I certainly appreciated your recounting of some of the things that went on there. I must give all credit to the battery commander, destroying bridges with artillery from 14 miles away even though they're eight-inch shells. That's quite a feat because artillery, especially in World War II, was not known to be particularly accurate. To take out a bridge is quite a feat.

MGen Richard Rohmer: It was quite a feat.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Yes. Thank you for filling us in on that.

I want to ask a general question. I see a list of different participants, particularly to the Netherlands. There are members of the Canadian Armed Forces, students, including cadets, tour groups, etc. Who's coordinating all of that? Are they being independently coordinated, for example, with the 150 members of the Canadian Armed Forces, or is it falling under a particular umbrella like Veterans Affairs?

Mr. John Desrosiers: From a Canadian Armed Forces perspective, we work very closely together when we go overseas. We're working jointly in weekly discussions in terms of how we connect. The 150 Canadian Armed Forces members that you see identified today will be directly accountable and working directly with Veterans Affairs Canada. There are other Canadian Armed Forces members that may be in the area, but the 150 represent an honour guard and the band.

In terms of the tour operators and the other marching bands, they're more private initiatives that we become aware of. We want to have full engagement of understanding what the Canadian content or the flavour will be over in the Netherlands. As well, we look for opportunities to integrate them in our programs. For example, there's a marching band from Ontario and a children's choir from B.C. We've arranged for a private event on the evening of May 6, which is a rest day for the veterans. We will bring all those groups together and we'll perform for the veterans outside of our hotel after supper. It also gives Veterans Affairs Canada and the Government of Canada an opportunity to understand how many Canadians will be in Holland to ensure that if there are any issues in terms of consular services that we can provide them the best information.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Okay. I see on some of the dates you have Government of Canada delegation only. What makes up the Government of Canada delegation?

Mr. John Desrosiers: The Government of Canada delegation is the Veterans Affairs Canada delegation. We're looking to support as many veterans as possible to return to Holland. We expect upwards of 70 veterans will take advantage of being part of the delegation. We're working through army, navy, and air force associations to nominate these veterans. Because of the ages of the veterans, we have a policy in place that allows them a caregiver, somebody who can ensure their day-to-day care. It's an important part of the experience. When you see a veteran it's kind of a plus one. In addition, because of the importance of the care and well-being of our veterans and the full delegation, we have trained medical staff from our Ste. Anne's Hospital that accompany us. We'll have four doctors and four nurses as well. Around the 200 mark is what we're looking for as an official delegation—

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: —from Veterans Affairs.

Mr. John Desrosiers: —from Veterans Affairs. It matches, coincidentally, close to what an Airbus can travel with.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: That's what's meant by a Government of Canada delegation only. When there are visits to particular cemeteries, museums, or cenotaphs, you're talking about this group of 200 to 250 people.

Mr. John Desrosiers: Correct.

• (0935)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: All right.

I noticed on the May 9 there's a national street parade, a liberation festival. Where's that taking place?

Mr. John Desrosiers: In Apeldoorn.

MGen Richard Rohmer: That is a big parade again and it's quite significant.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Right, thank you.

I'm wondering if you could fill us in on other commemorations that are taking place throughout the year. I noticed on your last page you had some that went up to May 29. Are there other things planned from May through December?

Mr. John Desrosiers: There are other initiatives.

For Government of Canada focused delegations there will be no more overseas delegations out to December. Veterans Affairs Canada will work with community groups. There are funding programs assisting them in terms of other significant anniversaries. Every community holds a particular pride or importance on a particular anniversary or particular moment in time. Our job is to facilitate through community engagement. Once we get beyond May the Veterans Affairs Canada focus will be turned into Veterans Week where there's a heightened awareness. We maintain our programs to ensure that Canadians are fully aware of the heightened period of awareness around the First and Second World Wars.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: There are funding programs to assist communities or groups and associations that want to commemorate something in particular.

Mr. John Desrosiers: Correct. We have a community engagement partnership fund. It's a program that allows communities a modest level of funding to assist with events and activities that are commemorative in nature.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Great. I take it that's on the website.

Mr. John Desrosiers: Correct.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Good. Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Thank you very much.

MGen Richard Rohmer: May I just add one thing?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Peter Stoffer): Yes, sir. General Rohmer, go right ahead.

MGen Richard Rohmer: The opportunity has arisen. You mentioned a band. One of the bands that's going to go over there is the Burlington Teen Tour Band. This is a band from Burlington that's been in operation since the sixties, and it's a marvellous marching band of kids from 12 to 18. They're absolutely superb.

The reason I'm mentioning this is that they're going over on their own account. I happen to be the patron of the band, and Lincoln Alexander in his time, he and I were the joint patrons. I am the only one left now as the patron, but they're going to be there. The air force had agreed to take over their instruments, but there isn't enough room, so we're going to have to raise the money to go anyhow. That's the way it happens. I just had to talk about the Burlington band. The Kincardine Scottish Pipe Band is going to be there as well. They're from Ontario. I've marched behind that band on Saturday night for 50 years.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Chicoine, go ahead.

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the witnesses for coming here to share their views with us on the upcoming commemorations in the Netherlands.

Major-General Rohmer, I would first like to tell you and my committee colleagues that I had the opportunity to take part in the commemorations for the 69th anniversary of the Normandy landing two years ago. The Canadian veterans delegation was not a big one. There were only 10 or 15 people.

What struck me and moved me the most was to see the warm welcome from the French to the veterans. They treated them like true celebrities. People of all ages, 20, 25 or 50 years old, wanted to speak to the veterans, to have their pictures taken with them and to thank them for freeing their parents or grandparents and for saving their lives. I was deeply touched by that.

As you said, Major-General Rohmer, in your wise counsel to the minister, at the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands, we will need to focus entirely on veterans because they are aging and we are unfortunately losing them from year to year. For a number of them, this will probably be the last time that they will be able to travel there.

You told us that you participated in some commemorations in the Netherlands. I imagine that, in those situations, veterans are treated in the same way, with deep gratitude, and that people invite them to share a meal with them. I heard those kinds of invitations. If I were a veteran, I think those types of stories would be the most meaningful gesture of gratitude for me.

Could you briefly tell us about your experience with the Dutch and tell us whether they were as welcoming and grateful as the French two years ago?

• (0940)

[English]

MGen Richard Rohmer: The answer is yes. I could tell you of one situation, and it involves Prince Bernhard.

It was the commemorative situation in the year 2000. I was in Holland. I had been taken over there by the people of the city of Venlo, where I had knocked the bridges down. They found out that I had done this and they invited my wife and me over for a celebration for a week in May 2000. I discovered that there was a big parade on at Wageningen, and I arranged to have tickets for that purpose. It was at the end of the week, on a Saturday, and I was in full uniform.

I always get permission from whoever is Chief of the Defence Staff to wear my uniform. That is appropriate, and I do that. I now have an official role again in the military, as the honorary adviser to the Chief of the Defence Staff. We met this morning.

In any event, I got to this parade and I was sitting behind the saluting base. When the parade started, it was Prince Bernhard who was taking the salute. He was not in uniform. When the parade finished, we went to a big reception in a building next door to that location.

My wife and I went into this building, and we were milling around with people. There was a couple of steps and a glass door. I said to Mary-O, "Prince Bernhard is in there, I'll bet you." We went up to the door and a man was guarding the door. I had all my stuff on and he opened the door. I went in with my wife. In a minute a young person from the air force, with an aglet, appeared to me and said, "General, you and I wear the same wings." He happened to be the head of the air force, a young general. I said, "We're here, and we think we'd like to see Prince Bernhard. He's over there." He said, "Ah." Within about a minute—Prince Bernhard was sitting with two beautiful old ladies, so it was okay—he took us over to meet Prince Bernhard.

As it turns out, he was an old pilot. I'm an old pilot. We bonded immediately. I have pictures of this meeting. In a minute he had his arm around my back and I had my arm around his back. We became good friends instantly. I corresponded with him until he died. Whenever it was May 5, I would send him a little note.

The reality is that the people of Holland really remember. They see the contribution that Canada made to their freedom. With all of the people who are still there in the graves, 7,000 plus, they have not forgotten. The Germans treated them so badly during the war that to have a response of this kind stayed with them—and with us when we go to be with them.

That's just one instance.

[Translation]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Thank you. I hope that as many veterans as possible will have the opportunity to go on this trip and to receive, perhaps one last time, this gesture of gratitude. As I have just said, if I were a veteran, this kind of testimony would deeply touch me.

Thank you once again.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Hawn.

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, all of you, for being here.

General Rohmer, I flew out of Eindhoven myself, but it was 30 years or so after you did. It was a friendlier time, obviously.

MGen Richard Rohmer: The Eindhoven runway is one single strip that is about ten degrees off. That's what we had to operate from. It's still the same, except that it is beautifully kept now.

• (0945)

Hon. Laurie Hawn: And we used a little more runway in our aircraft than you used in yours.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I lived in the area of Alsace. You were talking about your name and your heritage, and of course, depending on when in history you were talking about, it could well have been German.

MGen Richard Rohmer: It's French.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I understand.

That's how I would remember it as well.

The Chair: You have to change it to "e-a-u".

Hon. Laurie Hawn: That's right.

We talk about Gallipoli, General. Remember this is between your sense of history and your sense of Canadians' appreciation and understanding of history. Gallipoli for the Australians and New Zealanders is a seminal event. Vimy, obviously, was a seminal event for Canadians.

Can you compare the two, the relationship between the Kiwis and Aussies with Gallipoli and Canadians with Vimy? Are there things we can learn from these folks about how we relate to Vimy, and how we get Canadians to relate to Vimy, compared with the way they do to Gallipoli?

MGen Richard Rohmer: There's no way I could answer that question at all because you and I weren't there.

We know that the Aussies, having trained with some of them, are a magnificent race of people who are quite different.

I couldn't answer that question at all.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I don't mean it from a military point of view at all. I mean from the way we relate to history and the way we commemorate that.

MGen Richard Rohmer: The best I can say about Gallipoli is Churchill, right?

Hon. Laurie Hawn: It was not his finest hour.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Of course it wasn't. That's the thing that I can't....

That's a great question, but I can't answer it.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Okay. I appreciate that.

You have vast experience with these kinds of events and commemorations. We've been together at a couple of them, as you have with Peter. You've been with the Queen at a number of them.

I don't think you were at the Bomber Command Memorial.

MGen Richard Rohmer: No, I'm not Bomber Command. I'm something else.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: I understand that, but we're all the same under the skin.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Yes, that's right.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: With regard to your experiences with the Queen, you've been at many events with her at these kinds of things.

What are your experiences with her, her sense of history and her sense of Canadians' role in history? I know she has a very deep understanding and appreciation of that.

MGen Richard Rohmer: She does, indeed.

My first time with her was in 1975. I was commander of the air reserve group as it was being put together.

This was in Tortola. It was her 25th anniversary celebration, and I was tasked to raise money to buy, as part of St. John Ambulance, an ambulance and get it down to Tortola and have her present the ambulance to the chief minister when she was there for the opening of Parliament in 1977, I think it was.

That was the first time I met her. I raised the money for the ambulance, got it built, and flew it down. The commander of Air Command, where I was lodged at that point, said there would be a training exercise down to Tortola, strangely enough.

We got the ambulance down, and when she came to the hospital, I was standing in front of this beautiful new ambulance. I had the keys in my hand. Mary-O was with me. When the Queen came up, I did what I was supposed to do. I handed her the keys and said, "Your Majesty, in your capacity as the sovereign head of the Order of St. John, will you please give the keys to the chief minister." He was standing right next to her—a great man. She did that.

Then she said, "General, you may know that I drove an ambulance during the war." I said, "Of course, Your Majesty, I remember very well." She said, "I'd like to see the inside of the ambulance." I said, "Come with me." There was a little ramp up the side and a drop-off. We have pictures of this. She followed me up, and I went up to the door and pushed the button, but somebody had locked the door and the keys were back with the chief minister. She said it was all right. We have the pictures, in which she is smiling and laughing.

She was a very good-looking young lady, I can tell you that. She was really beautiful.

The Chair: She's younger than you are.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Everybody is.

Voices: Oh, oh!

MGen Richard Rohmer: That night.... I have to tell you this. This is off the record, of course.

Voices: Oh, oh!

MGen Richard Rohmer: That night there was a reception on *Brittania*. I had a connection with Paul Martin at the time—I had worked with Paul—and I had to get an invite onto *Brittania*. I'm a foreigner, but it worked, and somehow we got on. I was in my mess kit, and so forth, and I was the last one, with my contract, through the line to meet Her Majesty and Prince Phillip.

We got through, and she wanted to talk. She dismissed Prince Phillip. She had been in Canada for the celebration of her anniversary as Queen, and she was very upset about the prime minister of the day, who will be nameless at this point—we all knew who he was, a great fellow—because he had kept her in Ottawa during her time to visit Canada for the celebration of her 25 years.

She talked to me in great terms and never called the prime minister "Prime Minister So-and-So"; it was not even "Mr." She was upset about the fact that he had kept her in Ottawa.

• (0950)

The Chair: There was a minority at the time.

MGen Richard Rohmer: I don't do anything political. You know that, Chairman.

The Chair: When you say Paul Martin, you actually mean "the" Paul Martin, not the "Junior" who came later.

MGen Richard Rohmer: No, this is the real Paul Martin.

Voices: Oh, oh!

MGen Richard Rohmer: He's Windsor; I was Chancellor of the University of Windsor for 13 years, and Paul....

No, I can't tell you a Paul Martin story. I could, but I won't.

The Chair: He was a storyteller too.

MGen Richard Rohmer: Anyhow.... In reality, we had a wonderful conversation, and she was still steaming.

I've met her several times since. At Juno Beach in 2004—I ran the organization to put that together, and there's a great picture—when she came, she was followed...and on the other side of the car I'm there, leading a little group to meet her. Then "himself"—I call him the "Old Stick"—Prince Phillip gets out of the other side of the car, comes around, and he's in his full admiral's uniform, with gold braid up to the armpit. When he came around, I held out my hand—after saluting, of course—and said, "I'm General Rohmer." He said, "I know you are, and you've got more medals than I have."

Voices: Oh, oh!

MGen Richard Rohmer: In any event, I haven't any more stories about the Queen, except that she's fantastic.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Colonel.

Mr. Boughen.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): This is just an observation. I don't sit on this committee, but I'm certainly enjoying the morning with the guests who are here.

Can you share with the committee anything that's ongoing after the initial celebration? Often there are events and then things just quiet down and nothing more happens until the next millennium kind of thing. Is there anything that's happening from your perspective that's ongoing after the celebrations are done in May? Is there some longitudinal thought to keep veterans together, give them a chance to socialize, and bring them forward in certain instances to highlight their contribution to the country?

It seems to me that we burst onto the scene with a lot of fanfare, a lot of action, and then it goes clunk. Is there anything that you see happening that will avoid that clunk and make sure there's some ongoing action for vets?

MGen Richard Rohmer: The ongoing clunk is age. When we're finished with this one, and I call it every 10 years, then there will be no more for World War II veterans. There will be no more 10-year ceremonies that are big because we'll all be gone. It's as simple as that.

In terms of any organization to bring veterans old or new together on an ongoing basis, I'm not aware that any kind of planning is in process, certainly not from my point of view.

John, are there any?

Mr. John Desrosiers: As the Major-General mentioned, from a Veterans Affairs Canada perspective, the 10-year cycle, or the 60th or 70th, as an example, is an opportunity to bring it to a much larger level than say the 68th or 69th.

Part of the Government of Canada strategy has always been to go overseas with a delegation. Because of the age of the veterans, an average of 91, it was very important that the 70th cycle be recognized as the last time. We certainly saw a heightened awareness around the 70th of D-Day back in June, when 99 veterans returned to France. We expect somewhere in the vicinity of 130 to 140 liberation of the Netherlands campaign veterans to be back in Holland.

In a more tangible way, certainly the Government of Canada, with the heightened period around the 100th and 75th of the first and second, are providing an opportunity with the Second World War tribute. It is a pin and a certificate that all Second World War veterans have the opportunity to receive. It's through a certification or a nomination bid where they identify and we work to ensure that they have that pin.

In terms of kind of the clunk or the lull, it's really that awareness of community engagement. It's making communities aware of the importance of Canada's role in military accomplishments. Part of that responsibility lies with Veterans Affairs Canada and certainly with our intergovernmental departments such as DND and the Department of Canadian Heritage. During this heightened awareness period out to 2020, there will be the opportunity for Canada to ensure that Canadians from coast to coast are aware of what these veterans did, what these men and women did for us 70 years ago, and certainly spin-off initiatives will happen in our home communities.

● (0955)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Considering that the next moment will come to us at the courtesy of the NDP as a gift to Frank Valeriotte, I thought I'd give my closing statement before, because I may not have time after Frank.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: This is about Thursday, April 2. We'll resume our study on the continuum of transition services with Commodore Watson, director general of morale and welfare services in the Department of National Defence, as well as two of his colleagues, Colonel Gérard Blais, director of casualty support management, and Phil Marcus, associate vice-president of operations policy and product management. They will be appearing to discuss the service income security insurance plan.

[*Translation*]

That will be the 44th meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, and it will begin at 8:45 a.m. here in Room 112-North for about one hour.

[*English*]

Mr. Valeriotte, you have all the time you want.

Mr. Frank Valeriotte: I will be brief. I had the opportunity to be at Menin Gate and lay wreaths with Minister Fantino. They have an incredibly high regard for John McCrae. A number of people came to speak to me about John McCrae when they learned I was from Guelph.

I am wondering if there is any commemoration that's planned in Europe, in Belgium or in France, commemorating John McCrae. Is there any specific commemoration?

MGen Richard Rohmer: I'm not aware of anything specific at this time. It may emerge as we move along.

May I make a closing remark, Mr. Chair?

● (1000)

The Chair: You have all the time you want.

MGen Richard Rohmer: I would like to have 30 seconds.

We appreciate the opportunity to be here, to participate in this event, to express, and to learn from members about their involvement and interest in these matters. Let me put it this way: tomorrow is the first day of April. It is the 91st birthday of the Royal Canadian Air Force. I know it is because I'm a little older than the air force. Usually there is a mess dinner in all manner of air force stations across the country to celebrate the birthday of the Royal Canadian Air Force. I didn't want to leave this meeting without the honourable members of the committee being aware that the air force is very old, but it's very capable, has a lot of experience, and has a great future ahead of it. There was a big new airplane that arrived yesterday or the day before at Trenton, a new Globemaster. I wanted to let the committee know that tomorrow is a very important day in the air force.

The Chair: General Rohmer, Ms. Foster, Monsieur Desrosiers, on behalf of the committee, I want to thank you all for being here with us, for enlightening us, and for inspiring us. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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