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Chair

Mr. Tom Lukiwski

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC)): Colleagues, I'll call this meeting to order if I may. Thank you very much.

I just have a quick housekeeping note before we get going.

We'll have a one-hour panel. We have three witnesses today, one by video conference and two in person. We thank you all for being here.

I believe, colleagues, that I'll go with five-minute interventions, so we'll have time for a total of nine questions.

Mr. Masse, that means that rather than a seven- and a three-minute question, you'll get two fives.

We also have with us, via video conference from Edmonton, Alberta, Mr. Ron Rea.

Mr. Rea, can you hear us?

Mr. Ron Rea (As an Individual): Yes, I can.

The Chair: Thank you very much for being with us.

Colleagues, I think you all know the drill.

Mr. Rea, you'll have an opening statement, hopefully of five minutes or less. After all of the witnesses who are with us in person complete their statements, we'll go to questions by our committee members.

Mr. Rea, without further ado, the floor is yours.

Mr. Ron Rea: Thank you very much.

Good day, members of the committee, and thank you for inviting me to attend and speak on my own behalf and that of other Canadian Forces veterans with regard to the government's strategy for hiring veterans for public service positions.

I am a seventh generation Canadian, a 21-year veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces, a 12-year corporate executive, and I have been unemployed for 18 months. In 2006, after 21 years of distinguished service, I was 3b medically released from the Canadian Forces, a medical release classification placed upon me for a lifetime due to the numerous operational injuries I sustained during my air force career in domestic search and rescue operations. I retired with the rank of sergeant as a SAR tech team leader.

I was fortunate that, due to the economic boom in Alberta at the time of my medical release, I secured a very good middle management position with a very large corporation in Edmonton that sought to exploit my military expertise in critical thinking and problem solving. I went seamlessly from working with the military one day to civilian work the next, due to the successful application of the SISIP vocational rehabilitation program.

Due to the quality of my military training, I consistently scored the highest yearly evaluations among 1,200 employees and was described as a valuable asset to the executive branch in my civilian occupation.

When the economic downturn hit Alberta in 2015, the effects finally hit me directly in November 2017, when the company I worked for began to significantly downsize. My position was eliminated after 12 years of service. I was very confident that I would find employment quickly because of my extensive experience and background and because I was a veteran. I knew that I would not be eligible for the priority entitlement program, but that did not mean I was any less a veteran. I decided to apply to every Government of Canada job that was appropriate to my level of experience, and in doing so I applied to more than 30 positions.

Applying for any position through the Government of Canada website meant potentially spending an entire day filling out a single application online. It is a very exhaustive process and pulls no relevant information from a well-prepared and detailed resumé commonly accepted by most non-governmental job postings.

I passed all but two screening processes for all 30 jobs I applied for. Ironically, after serving 21 years in the military, the two jobs I was screened out of were for Veterans Affairs Canada. For all the others, I was informed through the Government of Canada website that my application was being retained until a position was available.

After one year, I was finally selected to attend two separate RCMP interviews at the CR-4 entry level. These were exhaustive interviews conducted by three HR staff. I passed both, only to be advised by email that I was a successful candidate and, although I was not being offered a position, I would be added to a pool of qualified candidates and that this pool would only be valid for a three-month period, at which time I would have to restart the process from the beginning.

At the end of my last RCMP interview, I asked the RCMP HR staff, if they were only conducting these interviews to fill a pool of qualified candidates, how often did they conduct interviews? Their response was that it was their full-time job. Every response I provided during the interview was recorded in writing by each person on the panel and I had to speak very slowly. I personally found this to be very labourious and inefficient.

In August 2018, I applied as an integrity services investigator with Employment and Social Development Canada. This was a very long, full-day online application. After waiting a few weeks, I was informed by email that I did not meet the required criteria, even though it was detailed in my application that I had extensive related experience, both military and corporate. This was the catalyst that forced me to contact my member of Parliament to seek guidance on this matter. I felt that I had been dismissed prematurely from this application.

After I contacted Employment and Social Development Canada, they got back to me to ask if there had been an oversight in my application. They stated that I was an unsuccessful candidate because I lacked investigative experience, even though my online application clearly detailed that I had thousands of hours performing that task. They then concluded that I would not be contacted further.

To my complete surprise, just this past month I was contacted by this same department that had dismissed me. Suddenly I was now deemed qualified, even though I had not reapplied. I attended a three-panel interview and an in-depth security screening process within a week and passed all levels of the screening.

I have now been advised that they are pleased to inform me that I am part of yet another pool of qualified candidates and that I may be offered a position in the future. However, the application will expire on September 4, 2019, with the possibility of extension.

• (1535)

In conclusion, my value as a veteran is no different from any other veteran, regardless of how long I have spent away from the forces. Canadians have invested millions of taxpayers' dollars in training me to be a critical thinker, to make life-and-death decisions and to operate a business with the same fiduciary and human resource responsibilities as a civilian executive. One would think that hiring a highly skilled veteran, regardless of their entitlement priority, would be the most prudent financial option since the return on investment is significant. This is especially true in my case, with my additional years of executive/corporate experience.

From a strictly a human resource standpoint, I am surprised that the Government of Canada has not adopted this common sense, logical approach to the strategy of hiring a veteran first.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our next witness will be Mr. Morgan Gay from the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Mr. Gay, the floor is yours.

Mr. Morgan Gay (National Negotiator, Public Service Alliance of Canada): I'm a negotiator with PSAC. I've been with the union for about 12 years.

I'm here today because, as I understand it, there are members of the committee who may have some questions or are interested in what the union has bargained for with respect to years of service accrual for members of the union who work in the border services group.

PSAC represents about 8,000 workers in the border services group. It consists primarily of law enforcement personnel who work for the Canada Border Services Agency, but we bargain with the Treasury Board.

I'm going to be talking a bit about seniority. I'll be using that term. In our collective agreement with Treasury Board, it's referred to as "years of service".

In the first contract we bargained for the border services group—this was in 2009—we negotiated seniority rights for shift scheduling and for vacation scheduling. Seniority is based on an employee's years of service in the public service.

In 2011, we negotiated with the employer because the union had been lobbying for years for military service to be recognized for vacation accrual. We negotiated with the Treasury Board language in our collective agreement, which says that vacation accrual will include former military service. The parties have never been in dispute on that matter.

When we reached settlement on that collective agreement, the one that got implemented in 2013, there was a dispute. We had started to hear from members of the union in the workplace, a number of different places. In Windsor, for example, we heard a lot from folks in the Windsor local that CBSA had come out with two separate seniority lists, one for vacation scheduling and one for shift scheduling, which is not what we agreed to. So, we filed a grievance.

We lost the grievance, and so we then went back into negotiations for the last round of bargaining, which resolved in 2018. This is the collective agreement that was ratified last year. In negotiations, we raised the issue with the employer again of years of service accrual. We took the position that we wanted to fix the collective agreement so that it would reflect the intent of what the parties originally negotiated and what we had expected. Our position was always the intent, which is that years of service are based on your time as a public servant in the public service and that military time counts for vacation accrual only.

We reached a settlement, and that's what the new collective agreement actually says. It says that seniority is based on your time as a public servant. Of course, under the law, if you are non-civilian military personnel in the Canadian Forces, you are not an employee. You are not considered an employee. You're under a separate pension regime. You are under an entirely separate employment regime than that of the public service.

As we prepared for this round of negotiations, the union went through what's called an "input call". What we do is we ask the members what they want to see addressed in this round of bargaining. Every local talked to the membership. We had hundreds of suggestions from the membership about what they wanted to see addressed, and we had contradictory input from the membership.

Some members of the union said, "We think our military time should count for seniority for vacation scheduling, for shift scheduling and for other matters"; and we had other members who said, "No, we want to keep the definition exactly the way it is now." In light of the fact that there was no consensus on this matter, and it was a contentious issue, the bargaining team, with the support of the elected leadership of the union, put this to a membership vote. We had a plebiscite. It was an online vote. People were mailed packages. It was explained to folks what they were voting on. The leadership of the union and the bargaining team took no position on the issue. People had two choices when they voted. Members could vote either in favour of the status quo, which is that, for scheduling, years of service are based on your time as an employee in the public service, or in favour of wanting the bargaining team and the union to advocate for former military service to also be included in the seniority definition for shift scheduling and vacation scheduling.

A website was set up. Webinars were done. As the union's negotiator, I did webinars with members who called in. The vote was held between February 18 and March 1. Just under 60% of the membership voted in favour of leaving the definition the way it is, so that years of service for shift scheduling, for vacation scheduling, and for who will work on holidays and who will not are based on your years of service in the public service. Of course, as always, your vacation accrual is based on your military time.

● (1540)

I spent all day today negotiating with Treasury Board before I came here. The position the union is taking is that the definition should not change because that's what the membership voted on.

I'll be happy to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our last witnesses will come from the Treasury Board Secretariat. We have Mr. Baxter Williams.

Mr. Williams, the floor is yours.

Mr. Baxter Williams (Executive Director, Employment Conditions and Labour Relations, Treasury Board Secretariat): I'll actually turn it to Sandra to provide the opening remarks.

Ms. Sandra Hassan (Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment Conditions and Labour Relations, Treasury Board Secretariat): Yes, I'll provide the opening remarks.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting us to appear before this committee as representatives of the Treasury Board.

Our sector undertakes all collective bargaining activities for the core public administration and we establish terms and conditions of employment for non-executive employees, including vacation leave entitlements. Our sector also provides interpretation services for departments when they have questions with regard to all terms and conditions of employment or the intent of the policies and directives.

In light of the prior testimony, we understand that this committee has a particular interest with regard to the policy considerations of prior service or seniority when calculating vacation leave entitlements for veterans upon hiring them in the federal public service. We can confirm that prior to April 2012, veterans' prior service was either not considered or addressed inconsistently in various collective agreements.

This inequity was identified in budget 2012 to be rectified. On June 20, 2012, the directive on terms and conditions of employment for the federal public service was amended to include service with the Canadian Forces in the definition of "service" for vacation leave purposes. That was effective April 1, 2012. This allowed prior service as a member of the Canadian Forces to be consistently taken into account in the calculation of vacation leave credits for all employees in the core public administration. This language was subsequently negotiated and added to all collective agreements in the core public administration.

Any former service in the Canadian Forces for a continuous period of six months or more, either as a member of the regular force or of the reserve force while on class B or C service, is included in the calculation of vacation leave credits.

Veterans who join the public service can contact their compensation adviser or the public service pay centre with a record of service—if they have eligible prior service—and compensation staff will review their file and make adjustments as required per the relevant collective agreement.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to questions.

Our first intervention will be from Mr. Drouin. You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Francis Drouin (Glengarry—Prescott—Russell, Lib.): I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.

My first question is for the Treasury Board with regard to what we've heard at committee. I know you've probably read some of the testimony delivered here.

For a lot of the veterans who want to apply, their years of service are not recognized. You've alluded to that a little bit in your testimony. Yes, vacation is recognized, but when it comes to shift scheduling and whatnot—I think Mr. Gay just mentioned it—their years of service are not being considered. Is there any leadership role that's being taken to potentially educate members of the public service to support that? I think it's pretty unanimous on this committee that we should be recognizing military service as years of public service when they apply within government.

The other issue has to do with transferring skills. Are we trying to help the military? Is there collaboration between the military and Treasury Board or the Public Service Commission? I know you can't speak on behalf of them, but is there a leadership role from Treasury Board to ensure that there is that transfer and knowledge of their skill, so that if they've served as a private or done whatever job in the military when they serve our country, they can apply for these types of jobs within the government? We've heard that consistently across testimony on our committee.

Ms. Sandra Hassan: Baxter, go ahead.

Mr. Baxter Williams: I'm afraid that in some respects we may not be great witnesses on this matter. I guess I should give you a little background to explain why.

Our principal function is engagement with my colleague here and other unions in negotiating collective agreements. Within that world in which Sandra and I operate, staffing considerations are specifically excluded. The Public Service Commission mainly ensures the integrity of the staffing function, and the responsibility for staffing decisions is distributed among deputy ministers and elsewhere in government. In our world anyway, that's not something we are involved in. We mainly consider the terms and conditions of employment under which employees operate.

I'm sorry I can't answer your question, but I hope I gave you some context around where we're coming from on that.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Mr. Gay, you've alluded to the fact that the members voted against former military service being recognized in shift scheduling, and of course we respect the will of the membership, but how do we provide that education to members to say that it's just the right thing to do?

You said that the leadership did not take a position on that. Was there a particular reason why you didn't take a position on that? Does the leadership now have an official position on this issue, or do they simply say, "Well, because our membership voted to maintain the status quo we're going to advocate for this particular position"?

Mr. Morgan Gay: First off, I'm not going to speak on behalf of the elected leadership of the union, but I can tell you my perspective as a negotiator for the union.

The union lobbied for years for military time to be included for vacation accrual. With respect to the years of service issue, it was hugely contentious within the membership. From our perspective, the only way we could resolve this issue was to let them vote on the matter. In fact, it could be argued that they already did vote on the matter because it was contained in the collective agreement that got ratified in 2018, when the definition got changed.

• (1550)

Mr. Francis Drouin: For my own understanding, does the following happen? If a member transfers from PIPSC to PSAC or from another union, do they start at the bottom, or do they keep their years of service recognized?

Mr. Morgan Gay: They keep their years of service because they were employees in the public service.

Mr. Francis Drouin: Yes.

Mr. Morgan Gay: If Parliament decided to change the legislation with respect to who is an employee and who is not—and I'm not

saying I'm advocating for that, because it's your decision as members—well, okay, but you haven't done that. Consequently, an employee is defined as an employee under the Financial Administration Act and the Public Service Labour Relations Act, or whatever it's called now, the Federal Public Sector Labour Relations Act. They changed the title of the legislation recently.

We did not take a position on the issue. There was campaigning in the workplace. There were lots of people who advocated for changing the current definition, but we did not take a position because we felt that we needed direction from the membership on this. The union is a democracy. The membership has directed the leadership on what they want on this, and that's the position the union is taking in bargaining.

The Chair: Mr. McCauley, you have five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): Welcome everyone.

Mr. Rea, I'm going to start with you. First of all, welcome to our committee and thank you for your many years of service to Canada. You made a comment that really hit to the core. You said that you're always a vet, even after the five-year priority hiring time is up.

One of the things we've heard from other vets is that perhaps we should extend the five years. Is that something you would agree with?

One of the reasons I'm asking is that we've also heard that some issues, medical discharge issues—perhaps PTSD or other medical issues—come up after the five-year period. I think you were medically discharged. Would it serve veterans better to extend the priority hiring past five years?

Mr. Ron Rea: You bring up a very good point, in that a lot of medical issues are not recognized or diagnosed for many years after the fact. For whatever reason, some veterans manage to lead a perfectly functional life for many years, and then suddenly something happens that triggers something, and the next thing you know they've been diagnosed with PTSD. This could be 10 years down the road. I've seen it happen. It never happened to me, even though I was exposed to a lot of trauma while working in the Canadian Forces.

I've seen it happen personally with friends and other colleagues, but to place a time limit on it and labelling a veteran in that way I think is inappropriate.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: In your case, again—once a vet, always a vet—should the same rule apply to regular priority hiring? Right now, the highest priority are the medically discharged, and the next highest priority are those who have served at least three years in uniform. Should we just remove that five-year period for those vets as well? Again, you've served your country. Do you see a reason that we'd continue with a five-year maximum?

Mr. Ron Rea: No, as I said, “Once a vet, always a vet.” I was given a 3B medical release against my will. I scratched, clawed and tried to stay in the military as hard as I could. Even if I couldn’t do my chosen profession, I wanted to stay in the military, because I enjoyed the lifestyle and ethos of the Canadian Forces. I was told in no uncertain terms that a doctor had assigned me a 3B medical release and that I had to leave.

If it weren’t for that, I’d still be in the Canadian Forces to this day. I never asked for that release. It was placed upon me.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You’ve talked about your difficulty in applying for positions within the public service. Almost every veteran we’ve had appear before us has had the same issue. One of them even commented that they heard from the public service themselves that “You’re not wanted here. Why are you even bothering to apply?”

Are you hearing that same information from the veteran community you deal with? Is there the same anecdotal evidence that those in bureaucracy are putting up roadblocks to stop veterans from getting in and from recognizing them in their priority hiring?

Mr. Ron Rea: I think there is a carte blanche labelling of all veterans as having PTSD, especially with the war in Afghanistan, and all the veterans who came back.

I worked in domestic operations, strictly in Canada, saving the lives of Canadians throughout my entire air force career. Yet when I went to an interview, I knew as soon as I said, “I am a veteran,” the immediate thing that came into the panel’s mind was that I must be at risk of PTSD, which I am not.

• (1555)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: You’ve spoken about the public service not recognizing the many skills you’ve developed over the years with the forces. Could you expand upon that? I only have about 45 seconds, but could you give us a bit more information?

Mr. Ron Rea: Can you be more specific, please?

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What are some of the skills that you’ve picked up in your time in the military that are not being recognized in the public service?

Mr. Ron Rea: For instance, as a search and rescue technician, my primary responsibility as a very high-end paramedic—level 2—with some doctor’s skills that could be used in the field.... If I had to parachute into a plane crash, and didn’t have access to telecommunications with a doctor and a front-line hospital facility, I would have to go on my training to save the patient’s life. This was a high-end skill set that all search and rescue technicians were given.

That’s just one example. This binder I have on the desk here is filled with every skill I’ve ever acquired through the military, as well as all of my evaluation reports and everything else. When I bring this into a job interview, people ask what it is, and I tell them that it is my body of work. If they want to ask me a question regarding my resumé, it’s right there, as proof that I actually did that.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It is not recognized in the public service.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, we’ll have to move on to our next intervention.

Mr. Masse, you have five minutes.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): I’m going to continue on that theme, but switch over to questioning Mr. Williams and Ms. Hassan.

With regard to the medical discharge of someone like Mr. Rea, what is recognized by the Treasury Board and in the collective agreements that we have? What does the military recognize as a medical discharge, and how does that equate to employee evaluations? Are there any understandings or memorandums of understanding that you have with the military for those skills and abilities, and also a medical discharge?

Mr. Baxter Williams: In the context of a collective agreement, they apply to existing employees. The question around medical discharge would arise more in the staffing decision, which is external to the negotiation process.

If you look at the nature of a collective agreement, which is seeking to define pay, hours, scheduling and other specific terms and conditions of employment, the concept of medical discharge doesn’t enter into those considerations.

Mr. Brian Masse: You’ve reached—

Sorry, go ahead.

Ms. Sandra Hassan: What we do consider is the time that a member has served. That’s the key feature when we’re looking at bridging them into the public service.

Mr. Brian Masse: Doesn’t it seem a little incomplete? Has there been thought about that, though, in terms of reciprocity, or at least some type of parallel? Has there been work done? If you’re recognizing the time, then you’re recognizing that there’s latent ownership and value there. The mere fact that they have a medical condition related to their experience in employment in one capacity or another under the Government of Canada....

I guess this comes from my background. Before here, I was an employment specialist on behalf of persons with disabilities in the workplace.

What has been done to assume some sense of co-operation, of understanding that there might be some medical issues, or a medical discharge, but it’s done through a formula and it’s done through a process? How does that apply to our negotiating of other agreements, especially when you’re now actually considering some type of recognition of time in service?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: There are other forms of recognition that are not in the collective agreements.

We're here; we're in charge of the collective bargaining. There are other groups that do the staffing and do have specific programs at the PSC, for example, for priority placements of former members who have served in the reserve or in the forces. There has also recently been the creation of a position of a deputy minister who is now in charge of disabilities. Ms. Yazmine Laroche was appointed in the past months, and her role is exactly that.

However, in the collective agreements and the terms and conditions of employment, we don't have specific measures addressing that issue.

• (1600)

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Gay, because of that hole, then, you and your members are left with coming up on the fly for current agreements in how to deal with that lack of a full policy that has evolved, for one reason or another. It's not a fault; it's where we're at right now. That's why your members are doing a plebiscite, because there's a gap between the two in terms of public policy. Is that not correct?

Mr. Morgan Gay: As Sandra just said, what we bargain for is people who are working for the government now, not how they come into the government.

We've made proposals in bargaining. We have a proposal on the table right now to deal with people accessing leave so they can continue their military service. There are different things we've put on the table. However, with respect to who gets hired into the public service, we haven't bargained language. Technically, under the legislation, that's not something we deal with in collective bargaining.

Mr. Brian Masse: No, and I don't know how you can, because they're not even part of your responsibility yet. You can't just bargain on behalf of employees five or 10 years in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Morgan Gay: If they're not paying dues, we can't bargain on their behalf.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madame Yip.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.): *C'est moi.* It's "Ratansi".

Mr. Chair, what are you doing?

The Chair: Madame Ratansi, we had a slight switch here. You're up for five minutes.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Thank you, everyone.

Mr. Rea, I was impressed that you were able to transition from the military to the private sector quite seamlessly. Could you briefly explain how you did it? What was it that the private sector looked for in you?

Everyone who we have listened to was trying to get into the public sector, but those who went into the private sector got an easier ride than going into the public sector. Therefore, I'd love to hear your story.

Mr. Ron Rea: Okay. In my case what happened was that when I was advised by the medical authority that I was going to be released

under 3B medical, suddenly the wheels went into motion. SISIP contacted me and said, "You are now eligible for the vocational rehabilitation program. Would you like to take that?" Then they explained how it works. For six months, I am still attached to the unit in which I'm serving. However, during those six months, I can go and find employment elsewhere. I can pick up a phone and say, "Excuse me, Company X, Y, Z, would you like to hire me for six months? You don't have to pay me. It would be like an on-the-job training program. I just show up for work every single day and you train me on a skill. At the end of the six months, if you're happy with my service, you can retain me and put me on as an employee. If not, you can tell me thank you so much and have a nice day."

In my situation, I went to work for West Edmonton Mall. I called them because I was very impressed with their security program. I thought they looked very professional. I happened to be visiting my children in Edmonton at the time, so I approached the management there. I asked them if I could become a security agent for the company, which I would use as a stepping stone to find what I considered to be "real" civilian employment. They flew me from Winnipeg. I was serving at the survival school in Winnipeg at the time. They flew me to Edmonton and put me up in a hotel—the whole nine yards. They brought me in for a job interview.

After the 30-minute to one-hour interview, they told me that, yes, they'd really like to pick my brain as a critical thinker, and they wanted to bring in someone with a military mindset, but they didn't want to hire me for the position I thought I was going to get hired for. I said, "Oh? What is it you'd like to hire me for?" They told me they wanted me to run their building's entire infrastructure—all the systems that run the entire building. I thought, "Oh, my goodness. This is ridiculous."

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Okay. I have another question for you now, because I am running out of time.

When you move from military to civilian, or to the public service, there is a problem that we have heard from everybody. It's with regard to your qualifications and those required by the public service. They cannot decipher your qualifications because they have never had to deal with them. Do you have any suggestions on this? Do you think the U.S. military does a better job than the Canadian military does in getting people into the public service?

• (1605)

Mr. Ron Rea: It's funny you should mention that. I was offered a job with United States Homeland Security and I turned them down. I said I'm a Canadian first and I'd like to work in Canada.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Mr. Gay, I can appreciate the concerns that the Public Service Commission or your union might have had with the priority service recognition and shift scheduling, but in 2012 that was available to them, and then in June 2018 you renegotiated. What changed? Why did it change? Do you have any idea of what the mentality of the union was at that time?

Mr. Morgan Gay: Yes. I've been the union's negotiator for this group since 2007, so I was there in 2012. What happened was that from our perspective—I don't expect these folks to agree—we don't think the employer was properly applying the collective agreement. From our perspective, what was negotiated was that years of service in the Canadian Forces would count for the accrual of vacation time, meaning the amount of vacation you could access on an annual basis. This meant that if you were working in the public service, you were covered by the collective agreement, and you had spent time in the Canadian Forces, you were going to get a bump now in the amount of paid leave you could get in a given year.

That change that we negotiated got taken by the Canada Border Services Agency to mean that we're now going to change how people choose their vacations and change the definition of seniority. We filed a grievance. We were unsuccessful. Consequently, in the last round of bargaining, we modified the collective agreement to reflect the initial intent.

You know, the union has never taken the position that people with Canadian Forces service should lose vacation accrual; we support that completely. The membership took issue with what was being implemented—two separate seniority definitions. That was not what got negotiated, so we negotiated something different. That has now been reinforced twice by the membership through democratic means.

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. McCauley or Mr. Deltell.

[Translation]

Mr. Deltell, you have five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Gérard Deltell (Louis-Saint-Laurent, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to your House of Commons.

[English]

First of all, Mr. Rea, I want to pay my respects to you for your service to our country, especially given the fact that you want to work for Canada instead of elsewhere. Through you, I want to thank all the people who serve our army, our country and our liberty so well, and who still want to work for us. I know it's not easy to address the medical release issue and I deeply appreciate you for doing that. On behalf of my colleagues, thank you for what you have done for this country.

[Translation]

My speaking time is limited. I would like to talk to Mr. Williams about the seniority that veterans are assigned.

Could you tell me who decided to negotiate the seniority of veterans and why some of their seniority rights were set aside? How were the negotiations that led to this decision conducted?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: As Mr. Gay explained about the negotiation process, the alliance consults with its members to determine the priorities together.

Similarly, at the Treasury Board Secretariat, when we are preparing to negotiate a collective agreement, such as the one for border officers, we call on the department concerned. We look at the economic data and we consult with the department to find out what its priorities are.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I am referring specifically to the seniority rights of veterans. That's what this is about. It is a matter of determining how their seniority can be recognized.

It is always more difficult to express this in French. In English, the expression is so beautiful: “civil servants.”

[English]

Civil servants and military people serve our country so well. There is no better way to identify them than as a “servant”, and now they're trying to work in civil society, in the *fonction publique*. Civil servants and members of the military are so close because they serve our country.

[Translation]

Let me ask my question again, very specifically.

Could you tell me who told you that the seniority of veterans should be negotiated and evaluated and when were you instructed to do so?

• (1610)

Ms. Sandra Hassan: We're not able to tell you now who gave those specific instructions.

However, we can tell you that, as Mr. Gay pointed out, the original collective agreement had a provision on this issue. A change was made as a result of the grievance.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Madam, I fully understand that Mr. Gay is speaking on behalf of his union. He is doing a very good job, by the way.

I want to know what's happening on the other side. I am talking about the Treasury Board Secretariat. I want to know who decided to negotiate, what was negotiated and when.

Mr. Baxter Williams: As you know, the union proposed the change. We rely on our negotiators to determine which proposals must be approved to reach an agreement with the union. In this case, it was recognized that the change was a priority for the negotiations to be resolved. In this process, the decision was to accept the union's point of view.

Does that answer your question?

Mr. Gérard Deltell: First, I would like to thank you for the quality of your French, Mr. Williams. My thanks also go to Ms. Hassan. That being said, with all due respect, I am not convinced that I have been properly informed.

When you say “the decision,” whose “decision” was it?

Mr. Baxter Williams: Excuse me?

[English]

Ms. Sandra Hassan: He wants to know the exact person who gave you instructions to forego that provision at the table. I'm saying that we don't have the exact answer today to that specific question.

[Translation]

Mr. Baxter Williams: Okay.

[English]

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I don't want the name, by the way. I want the title or the group from which this order or, rather, this indication came. We're not talking about an order. Are we talking about the civil servant or the office of the ministry?

The Chair: I'm afraid we're completely out of time.

If I could make a chair's intervention, if you could supply a title through our clerk, it would assist us greatly in the study we're just about to complete. We would appreciate some assistance in that regard.

Ms. Sandra Hassan: We will.

[Translation]

We will provide you with the answer shortly.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to Mr. Jowhari.

Mr. Majid Jowhari (Richmond Hill, Lib.): Thanks to all the witnesses for their testimony.

Mr. Rea, I'd like to thank you for the great service you've done for our country, specifically choosing to stay in Canada. We are all proud Canadians and hearing statements like that truly brings tears to my eyes. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

You said you have applied for 30 positions—I'm sorry I don't know the numbers—and it took almost one day per position to fill out the application. How many years of service have you provided to our country, sir?

Mr. Ron Rea: I provided 21.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: As far as military experience goes, how many courses or specific training have you had over those 21 years?

Mr. Ron Rea: If you look at this binder, which is double-sided, I probably took four courses a year. I thought when I joined the military that I wouldn't have to go to school again, and it turns out that I learned more in the military than I ever did in high school.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: In my calculation, you've taken about 84 courses on average.

Mr. Ron Rea: At least.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Did those 84 courses yield any type of degree or certification?

Mr. Ron Rea: I didn't receive a degree, but a diploma in business administration. As well I completed the officer professional development program with honours in 1997. That is a university accredited program that officers in the Canadian forces typically take.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: The reason I'm taking this line of questioning is that I had an opportunity to talk to some of the other witnesses about the number of courses they're taking. If you look at a four-year degree program of 10 courses per year, we're talking about 40 courses, and after four years you have a degree. That is becoming

a base for a lot of civilian qualifications. Yet you have over 84 courses. That's a double degree in my book.

Help us. What would your recommendation be to us around equivalency? How do we draw that map that could say these numbers of courses in these fields have been taken? These could be the equivalent to a type of degree or diploma, and then probably some minor courses could be taken during the six months, and that hopefully would be able to ease your veteran's transfer into civilian life.

● (1615)

Mr. Ron Rea: That's an outstanding question.

When a member is released from the forces, they go through a very rigorous release program. It would not be difficult for the people who are conducting the release to look at.... When I was in, it was called the 490 alpha—a very detailed list of all the courses you ever took in the military. It would not be difficult for the person who's conducting the release to sit down with a partner from a university and ask what this would be worth and translate it. I did take this to the University of Alberta and they just looked at it and asked what I had been doing for the last x number of years. I said learning. I asked if I could turn this into a degree.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Would it normally be the case manager who worked with you to help with that?

Mr. Ron Rea: No.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Who would that individual be?

Mr. Ron Rea: The release section of the military should be doing that.

Mr. Majid Jowhari: Okay. I've got about 45 seconds.

As part of the military you get top security screening. In your opinion, why is it taking so long to go through security recertification?

Mr. Ron Rea: That's another great question.

When I left the military, I was given a piece of paper that said I had top secret security clearance. When I went to the RCMP they ran me through another security clearance. I did another interview. They ran me through another security clearance. Then I went to another agency and they put me through.... The RCMP must have been sick and tired of seeing my name coming through for security clearances because they were constantly asking. All they had to do was punch in my name and say I already had it and ask if anything had fundamentally changed in my life and I would have said no.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. McCauley, you have five minutes.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Mr. Rea, again, thanks. I appreciate it. I'm stunned at your notebook of qualifications, and yet these can't seem to be transferred over to public life.

I understand that you're involved in some veterans groups back home. Have you heard from these other vets about anything similar to the challenges you've been facing?

Mr. Ron Rea: Oh, absolutely. For instance, a friend of mine who did his qualifications for civilian life was finally able to convince them that because he was a SAR tech leader of a unit he was able to get his bachelor's degree in emergency management. He then went on to do his master's degree. He wrote his master's degree and successfully completed it, with three other search and rescue technicians. However, when it came time for him to actually be employed, they said that because he didn't have a francophone profile he could not be hired.

The unfortunate thing for search and rescue technicians—and I'll be specific on this point—is that we cannot take French-language training, even though pretty much all of us wanted to be bilingual. The government wouldn't allow us to do so because of our operational requirement to not leave the unit for any amount of time.

On the one hand, he got his master's degree and had this great education, but he couldn't utilize it and get into the Canadian government because he didn't have his bilingual profile. He said, "Well, I'll take the bilingual profile—just send me to school for six months." They said no.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: They're remaking the film *Catch-22*. I think they could involve some of this.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Kelly McCauley: It's beyond ridiculous.

We've been hearing a lot again about recognizing the skills that you've picked up in the military. In all of your applications.... I think you mentioned that you've applied for 20 different jobs in the public service.

Mr. Ron Rea: Thirty.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Thirty jobs.... Is it completely black and white between the skills you've developed and have recorded in your book there and what the government has listed? We've heard from other vets that they believe some in the public service are using that as an excuse to not hire. For example, someone who has driven a tank was told they weren't qualified to drive a shuttle bus because they didn't have the right licence. Do you feel that this is being used and that they're purposely not recognizing the binder full of qualifications that you have there?

• (1620)

Mr. Ron Rea: Oh, absolutely. They're completely overlooking what the skill set is and then trying to figure out how this applies in civilian life. Most of my qualifications are civilian qualifications. When I apply online, they ask over and over again to please list this, this and this. You write it all out and then they don't transpose everything from your resumé.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I know that you left the service about 10 or 11 years ago. Before you left, was there any training or counselling on how to translate your skills to have them be recognized in the public service for applications or anything like that? Or was it just "you're on your way out, so goodbye"?

Mr. Ron Rea: Yes, they show you the door, but vocational rehab grabbed on to me and took care of me. From the military standpoint it was, "Okay, you're being 3B released, there's the door, see you later and here's all your paperwork." SISIP took care of me, mostly, after that point.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. Thanks.

I'm going to switch questions to you, Mr. Williams and Ms. Hassan. As the employer for all of the public service, what should Treasury Board do to address this issue that our vets have of qualifications being recognized in the public service?

I have to ask you this as well. What is your exact role? What is your job description?

Mr. Baxter Williams: My job description is executive director of strategic compensation management.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's not a job description. That's a title.

Mr. Baxter Williams: It has an element of it, in that it involves negotiating and basically establishing salaries and terms and conditions of employment.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: Okay. How can Treasury Board get involved to get this issue fixed? They have all these skills from the government to be recognized on the other side of the government. Someone has to take the reins. Veterans Affairs shows up and points a finger at someone else. PSPC shows up and it's a matter of, "Well, someone else should do it". It's everyone else's problem. No one is in charge.

Treasury Board is the ultimate employer. Should this come as a directive from Treasury Board to get this addressed?

The Chair: It's a tough question, and you have only about 10 seconds left.

If you want to think about that—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What would be best?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: We will give you an answer that you don't want to hear, but in terms of the recruiting and how to recognize the skills of our veterans, it's really the Public Service Commission that has the programs and the capacity—

Mr. Kelly McCauley: That's a fair answer.

Ms. Sandra Hassan: His explanation that he has to cut and paste the same information over and over again is a consideration for the Public Service Commission. I don't know if they've been here.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I think I'm out of time, but that's a great answer.

Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Welcome, Mr. Rea.

You mentioned that you spent a whole day filling out an application form. It must be really frustrating. Why did it take all day? Were there redundancies? Could there be some improvements?

Mr. Ron Rea: The cut-and-paste feature, fortunately, is a huge time-saver, but in a lot of the jobs I would apply for, they would ask very specific questions. For instance, they would ask for three examples of when I had to counsel someone in a disciplinary matter. Well, I could not just cut and paste that from a previous job, because that question had never been answered.

You have to be very specific and clear in how you answer the questions, because you don't want to have any accidental overlap with other job applications. You have to go through and actually write it out. The best way I found was to read the question and then draw the answer from memory or from my notes, instead of cutting and pasting and trying to figure out how to wordsmith it so they would understand my qualifications.

Ms. Jean Yip: Mr. Gay, regarding the vacation scheduling vote, what percentage of employees with a military background would have been affected at the time of the vote?

• (1625)

Mr. Morgan Gay: I don't know; I don't have that exact figure. I'm not even sure how we would get that information. We could, I suspect, request it from the employer, and they could provide it, but there were enough people who raised the issue that we had the plebiscite.

Ms. Jean Yip: Did the union negotiate anything else for the veterans in the past? Was there anything else?

Mr. Morgan Gay: We've tried other things, but the employer said no.

Ms. Jean Yip: Such as?

Mr. Morgan Gay: For instance, there was the matter of granting employees leave without pay to ensure that they.... I don't want to get too far into the details of this complicated stuff.

In terms of continuous employment, if you take a leave of absence for more than three months, you stop accruing for the purposes of a pay increment or additional matters. We've taken the position that if you are on leave without pay because you are on military service, you shouldn't suffer any loss in the accumulation of continuous employment. The Treasury Board has said no to that. That's an example.

That's still a live issue at the bargaining table, I would point out to my counterparts. I'll just leave it at that.

Ms. Sandra Hassan: We won't bargain at committee. We'll leave that for the table, if you don't mind.

Mr. Morgan Gay: I'm just answering your question, Ms. Yip.

Ms. Jean Yip: That's okay.

Do you feel you could be successful in the future in any other veterans issues?

Mr. Morgan Gay: You know....

Ms. Jean Yip: They are also members of the union. Is that right?

Mr. Morgan Gay: Absolutely, and we made that proposal because there have been issues in the past when people have been called up for service. In the case of the Canada Border Services Agency, which is an employer we deal with directly, there has not been consistency. For example, when the war was going on in

Afghanistan, there were people who got deployed overseas and their continuous employment was recognized. There were other people, though, who got deployed and their continuous employment was not recognized.

What we propose in bargaining is based almost exclusively on what we get from the membership. We get a lot of proposals from folks, and it's an entirely democratic process. We have an elected team that vets all the proposals we get, and there's a prioritization exercise. I'm not in a position to say, one way or the other, what's going to happen in the future. It depends on these democratic processes.

I can tell you, though, that we have made proposals in the past. I expect this will continue to happen because this bargaining unit is a law enforcement group predominantly. In this bargaining unit, perhaps more so than in others, there tend to be a lot of former Canadian Forces personnel who come to work there because it has to do with law enforcement. There's a certain skill set folks get in the forces that can transfer over to border services.

The Chair: Our final intervention will be five minutes.

We'll go to Mr. Masse.

Mr. Brian Masse: To Mr. Williams and Ms. Hassan, one of the reasons I was asking about the correlation before the medical discharge is that PTSD and other issues are in fact quite often linked to mental health. I know you have a memorandum of understanding on mental health. How is that going with enhancing or bridging that?

That would seem to be a mechanism that we have in place right now that actually helps in this matter.

What is in place with our memorandum of understanding on mental health? How are we looking to enhance that? That would be a natural bridge to some of the problems. We know from our previous discussion that we have a gap in the medical discharge information coming from our good veterans, like we have with Mr. Rea here.

How are we looking to augment our memorandum of understanding on mental health, to use it perhaps as a jumping point to make a more formal improvement in the connection between medical issues and discharges from one department, being that of Mr. Rea's, to that of the public service?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: The issue of mental health is one that is very close to our hearts. There was a MOU that was co-developed with the bargaining agents and that addresses issues of mental health. Since then there's been the creation of a centre of expertise on employee wellness and diversity, which will serve as an organization where all issues will be addressed.

In the previous round of collective agreement there were also agreements signed with the bargaining agents to look at what we call "employee wellness support plans". Those plans relate to the sick leave regime and have been in discussion with the bargaining agents. There are a lot of initiatives currently under way that will help address the issues that current and former employees are actually living through.

•(1630)

Mr. Brian Masse: Since the memorandum of understanding, would you say that you've taken a step forward in improving the issue of mental health?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: Work is continuing.

Mr. Brian Masse: In this agreement, are you looking to enhance that? Is that the goal here?

Again, we have a program here with a discharge. I want to see if there's consistency in that. There's been a lot of work on PTSD. There's been a lot of work in the Canadian public on how to deal with mental health as an issue.

It seems to me that we have a memorandum of understanding, but when will we actually get a full understanding on it?

When will we actually have it implemented and also an obligation on the employer for mental health? When is that something that's going to be something that's done?

Ms. Sandra Hassan: I gave you a general response to that to the best of my knowledge.

I have a colleague whose responsibility is the implementation of, or the next steps in regard to, that MOU. I can't answer that specific question, but you may want to invite the people who could answer those specific questions.

Mr. Brian Masse: I want to give the last word to you, Mr. Rea, for this. I want to thank you.

I think it needs to be more than an understanding. In a country like Canada, there should be more than just an understanding at this point.

Mr. Rea, I have about a minute left. I don't know if you have qualifications to fix a payroll system, because we desperately need your help on payroll.

But if you have some advice to the committee, please give it, because it's the last minute. I invite you to sharpen us in the last moment.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, for your indulgence.

The Chair: It's a tough question, Mr. Rea, but if you have any suggestions on how to fix the Phoenix pay system, go right ahead. You have about 50 seconds.

Mr. Ron Rea: I'm wicked good at Excel. I had to teach everyone in my unit how to use Excel and how to commit to fiduciary responsibility within all my units. I've always come in under budget and under schedule in every project that's ever been handed to me. When it came time to get things done, everyone came to me.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Maybe we can export that expertise over to Phoenix some time in the near future.

To all of our witnesses, thank you for being here.

To Mr. Rea specifically, thank you for your service to your country. Thank you for attending today by video conference. Your suggestions, recommendations and observations have been helpful.

To all witnesses, once again, should you have further recommendations or suggestions that would assist this committee in developing our final report, please submit them as quickly as possible to our clerk, because we'll probably start drafting a report within the next week or so.

With that, once again, thank you for your attendance.

Colleagues, we are adjourned.

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